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# Joan the Curate









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# JOAN, THE CURATE

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN

AUTHOR OF

"THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH," "THE INN BY THE SHORE," ETC.



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# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE NEW BROOM ... ..	1
II. A STARTLING INCIDENT ... ..	20
III. AN ALLY AT LAST ... ..	32
IV. FRESH OUTRAGES ... ..	49
V. A LOAD OF HAY ... ..	62
VI. A COLLISION ... ..	82
VII. AN UGLY CUSTOMER ... ..	92
VIII. REDE HALL ... ..	105
IX. TRAITRESS OR FRIEND? ... ..	126
X. THE MYSTERY OF THE GREY BARN	144
XI. IN THE LION'S MOUTH ... ..	157
XII. SETTLING ACCOUNTS ... ..	176
XIII. A LATE VISITOR ... ..	189
XIV. A PERILOUS RIDE ... ..	206
XV. THE SMUGGLERS' SHIP ... ..	221
XVI. A TRAITRESS ... ..	237
XVII. AN INNOCENT RIVAL ... ..	254
XVIII. A PRISONER ... ..	270
XIX. A VERY WOMAN ... ..	286
XX. THE FREE-TRADERS' FAREWELL ...	303





# JOAN, THE CURATE

## CHAPTER I.

### THE NEW BROOM.

IT was soon after the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, in 1748, had put an inglorious end to an inglorious war, that the Government of the day began to give serious attention to an evil which had been suffered to grow while public attention was absorbed by battles abroad and the doings of the press-gang at home.

This was the practice of plundering wrecked vessels, which had been carried on in combination with the smuggler's daring and dangerous trade, particularly on the wild marsh coast south of Kent, and the equally lonely Sussex cliffs beyond.

So audacious had the doings of these "free-

traders" become, that a brigade of cavalry was sent down into the old town of Rye, for the purpose of overawing them, while, at the same time, a smart revenue cutter, under the command of a young lieutenant of noted courage and efficiency, was despatched to cruise about the coast, to act in concert with the soldiers.

It was on a windy night in early autumn, when the sea was roaring sullenly as it dashed against the sandstone cliffs, and echoed in the caves and hollows worn by the waves, that a sharp knocking at the door of Hurst Parsonage, a mile or two from the sea-coast, made Parson Langney look up from the writing of his Sunday sermon, and glance inquiringly at his daughter.

"Now, who will that be, Joan?" said he, as he tilted his wig on to one side of his head, and pursed up his jolly, round, red face with an air of some anxiety.

"Nay, father, you have as many visitors that come for the ills of the body as for the health of the soul!" cried Joan. "I can but hope you han't another long trudge across the

marsh before you, like your journey of a week back."

At that moment there came another thundering knock at the little front door, and a handful of stones and earth was flung against the window, followed the next moment by a rattling of the panes.

Father and daughter, genial, portly parson, and creamy-skinned, black-eyed maiden, sprang to their feet, and looked once at each other.

There were wild folk in these parts, and lonesome errands to be run sometimes by Parson Langney, who had begun life as a surgeon, and who had been lucky enough to be pitchforked into a living which exactly suited his adventurous habits, his love of fox-hunting, and his liking for good wine and well-hung game.

Before the importunate summons could be repeated, Parson Langney had come out of the little dining-parlour, and drawn the bolt of the front door.

For Nance, the solitary housemaid of the modest establishment, was getting into years, and inclined to regard a late visitor as a person

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to be thwarted by being kept as long as possible waiting at the door.

"Hast no better manners than to do thy best to drive the glass from out the panes?" asked he, as soon as he found himself face to face with the intruder, who proved to be a sailor, in open jacket, loose shirt and slops, and flat, three-cornered hat.


"Oons, sir, 'tis a matter of life and death!" said the man, as he saluted the parson with becoming respect, and then pointed quickly back in the direction of the sea, which could be seen faintly glistening in the murky light of a clouded moon. "I'm from the revenue cutter in the offing yonder, where one of my mates lies with a bullet in's back, sent there by one of those rascally smugglers in a fray we've had with them but now. I've been in the village for help, but they say there's no doctor here but yourself. So I beg your honour'll come with me, and do what you can for him. And could you tell me of a woman that would watch by him? For we've all got our hands full, and he'll be wandering from his wits ere morning."

The parson, without a moment's delay, had begun, by the help of his daughter, to get into a rough brown riding-coat that hung from a nail on the whitewashed wall.

"Why, there you have me out," said he, as he buttoned himself up to the chin, and put a round, broad-brimmed black hat, with a bow and a twisted band of black cloth, tightly on to his somewhat rusty, grizzled bob-wig. "For there's none in these parts to nurse the sick as well as my daughter Joan."

"And sure I'm ready to go, father!" cried the girl, who, with the nimbleness of a fawn, had darted back into the parlour and brought out her father's case of surgical instruments, as well as a diminutive portable chest, containing such drugs and medicines as were in use at the time. "I'll have on my hood in a tick of the clock."

And by the time these words were uttered, she had flown up the steep, narrow staircase and disappeared round the bend at the top. The sailor, who had stepped inside the porch, out of the wind and a drizzling rain which had now begun to fall, was full of admiration and astonishment.



"Oons, sir, but 'twill be rough work for the young mistress!" said he. "The water's washing over the boat yonder, and we shan't be able to push off without getting wet up the waist."

"The lass is used to rough weather," said Parson Langney, proudly. "She'll tell you herself that where her father can go she goes."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Joan, wrapped in a rough peasant's cloak, and wearing a loose hood, came tripping down the stairs.

Not a moment was lost. With a word to Nance, who had put in a tardy appearance, the parson, with his daughter on one side and the sailor on the other, started for the shore.

The wind was at its worst on the top of the hill where the Parsonage stood. A very few minutes' sharp walking brought them all to a lower level, and within the shelter of a wild straggling growth of bushes and small trees, which extended in patches from the village almost to the edge of the crumbling cliffs.

Here they struck into a rough track made by the feet of the fishermen and less inoffensive characters, and before they had gone far they saw the hulk of the cutter, tossing like a little drifting spar amid the foam of the waves, and showing dark against the leaden, faint moonlight on the sea beyond. The parson asked a few questions, and elicited the usual story—a contraband cargo was being run in a little creek just where the cliffs broke off and the marsh began, when the look-out man on the cutter spied the smugglers, and a boat was sent out to give chase. There had been a smart brush, almost half in and half out of the water, between the smugglers on the one side and the cutter's men on the other. But, on the whole, as the narrator was forced ruefully to admit, the smugglers had got the best of it, as they all got away, leaving not so much as a keg behind them, while one of the cutter's men had had to be carried off seriously wounded.

“Zoons, and it was main odd they did get off so well!” went on the sailor, as if in some perplexity; “for the lieutenant himself landed a bullet in the leg of one of the rascals, that



should have brought him down, if he hadn't had the devil himself—saving your presence, mistress—to help him.”

In the momentary pause which followed the man's words, a sound suddenly came to the ears of them all, above the whining of the wind in the trees and bushes. It made Joan stop short for the space of a second, and turn her eyes hastily and furtively in the direction of a little dell on their left, where the bracken grew high about the trunks of a knot of beeches.

“Eh!” cried the sailor, stopping short also to listen. “What was that? ’Twas like the groan of a man.”

As he turned his head to listen, the parson and his daughter quickly exchanged a glance expressive both of alarm and of warning. Then the former seized the sailor by the arm, pushing onward towards the shore at a better pace than ever.

“Sure,” said he, in a deep, strong, resonant voice that would have drowned any fainter sound in the ears of his listener; “’tis but the screech of a hawk. This woody ground’s alive with the creatures.”

The man cast at him a rather suspicious look, but said nothing, and allowed himself to be led forward. So they hurried on, increasing their pace when the ground began to dip again, until they followed the course of a narrow and dark ravine, which cut its way through the cliffs to the seashore. Here they had to pick their way over the stones and bits of broken cliff, through which a brook, swollen by recent rains, gurgled noisily on its way to the sea. The tide was going down, and the thunder of the waves, as they beat upon the cliff's base and echoed in its hollows, grew fainter as they went. It was an easier matter than they had expected to get into the boat which was waiting to take them to the cutter; and though the tiny craft rose like a nutshell on the crest of the waves, and sank into deep dells of dark water, they reached the cutter safely, and scrambled, not without difficulty, up the side of the little vessel, which was anchored not far from the land.

A man's voice, full, clear, musical, a voice used to command, hailed them from the deck—

“Ho, there! Hast brought a doctor?”

"Ay, capt'n, and a parson to boot!" answered the sailor who had been despatched on this errand. "And a nurse that it would cure a sick man but to look at."

It was at that moment that Joan, who was as agile as a kitten, stepped on deck, and into the light of the lantern which the lieutenant himself was holding. The young man saluted her, with surprise in his eyes, and a thrill of some warmer feeling in his gallant heart. Joan curtsied, holding on to the nearest rope the while.

"You are welcome on board, madam."

"I thank you, sir."

And the young people exchanged looks.

What he saw was a most fair maiden, tall and straight, graceful with the ease and freedom of nature and good breeding, with sparkling brown eyes, even white teeth, and a merry gleam belying the demureness of her formal words.

What she saw was a young man only a little above the middle height, stalwart and handsome, with quick eyes grey as the winter sea, and a straight, clean-cut mouth, that closed

with a look of indomitable courage and determination.

"And yet, madam," the lieutenant went on, leaving his subordinates to help Parson Langney, who was portly, and less agile than his daughter, up on to the deck, "they should not have brought you. For, in truth, we are in no state to receive a lady on board. There has been ugly work to do with those rascally smugglers."

"I come not as a fine lady, sir," retorted Joan, promptly; "but as a nurse for a sick man. There is no state needed by a woman when she comes but to do her duty."

"Well said, madam; but I thank God your care will not be needed. The poor fellow who was shot by those ruffians has taken a turn for the better, and if the gentleman, whom I take to be your father, can but perform a simple operation for him——"

"My father, sir, is a most skilled surgeon, and can perform any operation," answered Joan, interrupting him proudly.

Her look was so full of fire, the carriage of her head, in its graceful hood, so superb, as she

uttered the ingenuous words, that Lieutenant Tregenna smiled a little as he saluted her and turned to the parson, who, panting and in some disorder, had at length reached the deck.

The young man introduced himself, and they saluted each other, the parson with some difficulty, since the continual motion of the vessel was somewhat trying to his landsman's legs. Then they went below, and in a few minutes the young man returned alone.

Joan had been accommodated with a seat by the tiller, and protected from wind and water by a tarpaulin, out of which her bonny face peeped white in the moonlight.

"You have no work for me, sir?" she asked, as the lieutenant came up.

"None, madam ; and even less for your good father than we feared might be the case. He has found the bullet, and 'twill be an easy matter to extract it, so he says ; and after that, 'tis a mere matter of a few days' quiet to set the poor fellow on his legs again. So the rascals escaped murder this time ; not that one crime more or less would sit hard on the conscience of such villains ! "



For a moment Joan said nothing. Then she hazarded, in a very dry, demure voice—

“But, sir, by what I heard, your side went as near committing murder as the other. The man who brought us hither spoke of a bullet in the leg of one of the fishermen.”

“Fishermen! Odds my life, madam, but that’s a very pretty way of putting it! I hope you han’t the same kindness for the rascals that seems to be strong among the country-folk here! Nay, I won’t do you the injustice to suppose you could hold their villainies in aught but abhorrence.”

“Whatever is villainous I hope I abhor very properly,” answered Joan with spirit. “And the shooting down of one’s fellow-men I do hold one of the greatest villainies of all.”

“When ’tis done by smugglers and plunderers of wrecks, no doubt you mean,” retorted the lieutenant tartly.

“Plunderers of wrecks we have none in these parts, or at least none that do the vile things that were done in times past,” said she quickly. “And if you and the soldiers that are come to Rye had had but the punishment of murderers

and wreckers in your eye, you would have met with more sympathy than is like to be the case if you mean to repress what they call in these parts free-trade."

"Well, madam, 'tis in truth the repression of 'free-trade' that we have in our minds, and that we intend to carry out by the strength of our arms. And I own I'm amazed to hear a gentlewoman of your sense and spirit speak so leniently of a pack of thievish persons that live by robbing his Majesty, and, indeed, the whole nation to which they belong. I can but trust you speak in more ignorance than you imagine, and that the doings of such ruffians as one Jem Bax, and another wretch called Gardener Tom, of Long Jack and Bill Plunder, Robin Cursemother and Ben the Blast have never come to your ears."

Lieutenant Tregenna uttered each of these names very clearly, and with solemn emphasis, standing so that he could see the expression of the girl's face as he mentioned them. To his great disgust, he perceived that, though she kept her eyes down as if to conceal her feelings, she was well acquainted with all these men,

and appeared somewhat startled to learn that he knew them so well.

"You have heard of these men?" he asked sharply.

"Yes, I've—I've heard of them."

"You know them, perhaps?"

A moment's pause.

"Ye—es, I know them."

"I won't affront you by asking whether you have any sympathy with them and their methods. With men that live by defrauding the revenue, and that scruple not to commit the most violent deeds in the exercise of their unlawful calling?"

The lieutenant's tone was harsh and arrogant as he asked these questions. Miss Joan still sat with her eyelids down, giving him a new view of her beauty, unconsciously proving to him that her face was as handsome in repose, with the black eyelashes sweeping her rounded cheeks, as it was when her features were animated with the excitement of conversation. She was silent at first, and the lieutenant repeated his last question somewhat impatiently. There was another slight pause, however, and

then a ponderous footstep was heard creeping up the companion-ladder.

"There's my father!" cried Joan, as she started up, in evident relief at the opportune interruption.

Parson Langney, holding on valiantly to such support as came in his way, staggered towards them, and ended by hurling himself against the lieutenant with so much force that it was only by a most dexterous movement that the younger and slimmer man escaped being flung into the sea.

"I ask your pardon, captain," cried the jolly parson, in good-humoured apology, as, with the assistance of the young folk, he reached a place of safety. "Remember, you're on your element, but I'm not on mine! Come and dine with my daughter and me to-morrow, and you shall see that my feet carry me well enough on the dry land."

"I thank you, sir, and I would most willingly have accepted your kind offer, but I'm engaged to dine with one who is, I believe, a neighbour of yours—Squire Waldron, of Hurst Court."

"Why, God bless my soul, so am I!" cried

the parson, in amazement at his own momentary lapse of memory. "Then, sir, I shall be happy to meet you there ; and I warrant you'll be happy too, for the squire's port wine, let me tell you, is a tippie not to be despised by his Majesty himself."

"Ay, sir, and there at any rate I shall feel comfortable in the thought that the wine has paid duty, which, I give you my word, is what I have not felt in any other house in the neighbourhood, public or private, since I arrived here."

But at these words a sudden and singular alteration had occurred in the parson's features. He seemed to remember the office of the person to whom he was speaking, and to become more reserved.

"Ay, sir, certainly," was all he said.

The lieutenant went on, with a return to the bitterness he had shown while discussing the subject of smugglers with Miss Joan.

"And as the squire is a justice of the peace, whose duty it is to punish evil-doers, I may at last hope, under his roof, to meet with some sympathy with the objects of justice, such as one expects from all right-thinking people."

"Why, sir, certainly," said Parson Langney again, somewhat more dryly than before. And then, turning to his daughter, he added briskly, "Come, Joan, we must be returning. The lad below will do very well now, sir, with quiet, and the physic I have left for him. And I'll pay him another visit in a day or two."

As he addressed these last words to the lieutenant, the parson was already preparing to lower himself into the boat which had brought him. He seemed in haste to be gone.

Lieutenant Tregenna then helped the young lady down into the boat, giving her as he did so a somewhat piqued and resentful glance, which, however, she demurely refused to meet with a return look from her own black eyes until she was safely in the little boat beside her father.

Then, as the small craft was tossing amidst the spray from the larger one, she did look up, with the struggling moonlight full upon her face, at the handsome young commander, on whom a touch of youthful arrogance sat not unbecomingly.

And Lieutenant Tregenna, as he saluted and watched the little boat, and in particular its fair occupant, was irritated and incensed beyond measure by what he took for an expression of merry defiance in her bright eyes

## CHAPTER II.

## A STARTLING INCIDENT.

HURST COURT, where Lieutenant Tregenna presented himself next day, by Squire Waldron's most obliging and pressing invitation, was an ugly Georgian house just outside the village of Hurst, standing in an extensive but little-cultivated park, much of which was in a primitive condition of gorse and tangle and unclipped, undersized trees.

The mansion itself was not in the heart of the park, but was built near the road, with nothing but a little stretch of grass and a wooden fence between.

A great baying of hounds and noise of disputing men-servants were the sounds which greeted the lieutenant when he arrived at the house. Even before entering, he had formed, both from this circumstance and from the extent



of the stables, some idea of the sort of rollicking, happy-go-lucky, rough country household he was to expect ; and he had scarcely set foot inside the wide and lofty hall when the onrush of half a dozen barking dogs, the crowding into the hall of three or four gawky men-servants, and the entrance of the squire himself, in a scarlet coat, with a loud and hearty greeting on his lips, fully confirmed this impression.

"Welcome, welcome to Hurst Court, lieutenant!" cried his host, seizing him by the hand with a grip like a blacksmith's, and promptly leading him in the direction of the music-room, across a floor where a couple of stag-hounds were lying lazily stretched out, and between walls laden with antlers and the grinning pates of three or four score foxes. "You should have come a couple of hours sooner ; for the ladies have a mind to show you their Dutch garden, and to regale you with some music before we dine. I know not, sir, whether such diversions are to your taste, or whether your liking runs more in the direction of fox-hunting and the shooting of game, as mine does? I have no taste, myself, for your finicking London

modes; but I'm told that the young bucks nowadays pride themselves more on cutting a fine figure in the ladies' drawing-rooms than in sitting a horse well and riding straight to hounds."

"Nay, squire, it will give me vast pleasure to hear the ladies' music," said Lieutenant Tregenna, when his host's volubility allowed him the chance of answering. "'Tis a diversion one can enjoy but seldom so far from town."

"Nay, we have better diversions here than those," said the squire disparagingly. "But my wife and daughters will be prodigious pleased that you are not of my way of thinking. For a stranger in these parts is a mighty welcome arrival, I assure you, and like to be made much of."

Indeed, it was quite perceptible to the lieutenant that there was a flutter of excitement going on in the music-room up to the very moment of his entrance; and the welcome he got from the squire's wife and two daughters was quite as sincere, though not so tempestuous, as that of the host himself.

## A STARTLING INCIDENT. 23

For Mrs. Waldron and the two young misses, her daughters, were quite as much in love with the pleasures of the town as the husband and father was with those of the country. And in dress, manner, conversation, and tone they marked the difference between themselves and him as ostentatiously as possible.

Thus, while the squire wore the old-fashioned Ramillies wig, with its bush of powdered hair at the sides, and long pigtail tied at the top and bottom with black ribbon, and the loosely-fitting scarlet coat which he had worn for any number of years, his good wife and two round-faced, simpering daughters were all attired in the latest modes of the town.

They all three wore the loose sacque or *négligée*, which was then the height of fashion; they tottered about in slim-heeled shoes, under huge hoops which swayed as they walked; while their hair was all dressed in the same way—knotted up tightly under the smallest and closest of caps, making their heads look singularly small and mean, when compared with the enormous width of their distended skirts.

They all seemed the most amiable of living

creatures ; and Lieutenant Tregenna found at last the sympathy he wanted, when he expressed that horror and hatred of smugglers which was at present the ruling passion of his mind. The squire had left him with the ladies, and he had been entertaining them with an account of the adventure of the preceding night.

“And I can assure you, madam,” he said to his hostess, when they had hung attentively on his words, and cried, “Wretch!” “Villains!” “How monstrous shocking!” at appropriate intervals, “that so deep-rooted has this evil become, that even the parson and his young daughter appeared to grieve more for the smuggler whom I wounded than they did for the poor fellow whom the ruffians shot!”

“His daughter! Oh, do you mean Mistress Joan?” said Mrs. Waldron, pursing her mouth a little. “Sure, sir, what would you expect from a country-bred wench like that, who tramps the villages and moors with her father like a man, and is almost as much among these fearsome wretches, the smugglers, as if she were their own kin?”

“Oh, la, sir ; you must know they call her

‘the curate,’” cried one of the young ladies, tittering, and looking languishingly at the visitor out of her little pink-rimmed eyes with the whitish eyelashes ; “for she’s quite as useful in his parish as he is.”

“And I’m sure ’tis a very rational diversion for a girl of her tastes,” said her sister. “You must know, sir, that she has never seen a play, nor any of the diversions of the town, and that she fills up her time twittering on a dulcimer to her father, and has barely so much as heard of the harpsichord.”

“I don’t wonder you was affronted by her Gothic behaviour,” went on Mrs. Waldron ; “but sure ’tis very excusable in a girl who has no polish, no refinement, and who takes no more care of her complexion than if she was a dairymaid.”

Tregenna felt considerable surprise at the storm of reprobation which he had brought down on the head of poor Joan. For he could not know that the young men of the neighbourhood, and even Bertram, the squire’s son, all showed a most boorish preference for handsome, straight-limbed Joan, with her free

bearing and her ready tongue, over the fine ladies of Hurst Court ; and that, at the Hastings assemblies, and at such routs as were given in the neighbourhood, Joan had more partners than any one else, though her gown was seldom of the latest mode, and her only fan was one which had belonged to her grandmother.

“Nay ; I honour and admire her for helping her father,” said the lieutenant, hastily. “I did but grieve that a young lady of so much spirit should take so wrong-headed a view of the matter.”

“Your consideration is wasted upon her, sir, indeed,” said Mrs. Waldron. “But hush ! here comes her father with the squire.”

There was no possibility of mistaking the loud, deep, cheery voice of Parson Langney, which could be heard even above the barking of the hounds, which was the first greeting given to every visitor. The next moment the door opened, and Parson Langney, the squire, and his son Bertram, entered, to be joined a few minutes later by a couple of country gentlemen more clownish than their host.

Bertram Waldron was an unhappy cross

between the country breeding of his father and the town airs and graces of the ladies. For while he affected the modish cut of the town in his clothes, swore the latest oaths, and swaggered about with a great assumption of the manners of the beau, his rusticity peeped out every moment in his gait, and in his strong provincial accent.

When they all trooped into the dining-parlour, where a huge sirloin was placed smoking on the table, it was not long before the stranger perceived that the sympathy he had met with from the ladies was not shared by the gentlemen.

Not only did they express but faint interest in his collision with the smugglers, and profess the greatest incredulity as to the alleged magnitude of their operations, but by the time the ladies had retired, it began to be hinted to him pretty freely, as the decanters passed round, that the less zeal he showed in the prosecution of his raids against the "free-traders," the more his discretion would be respected.

"Gad, sir ; I don't say theirs is an honest

trade," said the squire, whose face assumed a purplish and apoplectic tint as the meal wore on ; "but I say that 'tis best to let sleeping dogs lie ; and that your soldiers will do a monstrous sight more harm than good by driving the trade into wilder parts, where the fellows can be more daring and more dangerous. And what I say to you, who are but a young man, and hot with zeal, is this : that the easier you take things, the easier things will take you. And if you won't trust the advice of a man of my experience—why, ask the parson there, and take his."

"Gad's my life, sir ; but I can take no man's advice who bids me do aught but what seems to me my duty!" cried the young lieutenant with fire. He was incensed at the laxity of morals, which he now perceived to have permeated to every class of society in the neighbourhood. "I'm here, under the orders of his Majesty—the stringent orders—to put down smuggling and the wrecking connected with it. And what I'm sent to do, I'll do, please God, no matter what the difficulties in my way may be, nor what the dangers!"



## A STARTLING INCIDENT. 29

His words were followed by a dead, an ominous silence.

The day was dying now, and the red fire that glowed and flickered in the wide hearth showed strange lights and shadows on the painted ceiling, the painted and panelled walls, the long, spindle-legged sideboard, where more wine was waiting for the jovial band at the table.

The country gentlemen, one and all, looked up at the ceiling during the pause.

Before any one spoke, there came to the ears of all a sound which was easily distinguished as the gallop of horses, accompanied by the loud shouts of men, the cracking of whips, the creaking of heavy wheels. Lieutenant Tregenna, who was near the window, jumped up, and looked out, as a waggon, piled high with kegs, and surrounded by a band of half a dozen armed men on horseback, dashed past the house and up the hill towards the village.

"Smugglers, as I live!" cried Tregenna, much excited, and turning to attract the attention of the rest.

But not a man of them moved; not one so

much as turned his head in the direction of the window.

The blood flew to the young man's brain. "Gentlemen!" cried he, as he dashed across the room to the door; "you will excuse me. You, squire, are a justice of the peace; and I must do my best to bring some of these rascals before you, when, I doubt not, you will do your duty towards them—and towards the king!"

With that he swung out of the heated room, seized his hat and his heavy riding-coat which lay in the hall, and dashed down the lawn, cutting across to the left, just as a party of soldiers came riding fast up the hill in full pursuit of the smugglers.

"A d——d coxcombical puppy!" cried one of the husky squires, as he watched the stalwart figure of the young lieutenant making his way rapidly past the window. "What does he want setting up his joodgment against ours, and presuming for to think he's a better subject of his Majesty than what we be?"

"Let 'un be! Let 'un be!" said the third squire, grimly. "There's no need to worrit ourselves about him. If he doesn't get a

## A STARTLING INCIDENT. 31

bullet in his head before many days be over, why, you may eat me for a Frenchman, and bury my bones at the cross-roads."

And the rest of the company, with only one protesting voice, that of Parson Langney, who said the lad had no fault but youth, and he hoped he would come to no hurt, filled up their glasses and smacked their lips over the famous port, and never asked themselves whether it had paid duty ; for, indeed, there was no mystery about that.

## CHAPTER III.

## AN ALLY AT LAST.

THE soldiers were rattling on in pursuit of the smugglers at such a good pace that Lieutenant Tregenna only reached the road in time to see them turn the next corner and disappear.

He followed, however, at the best pace he could, hoping to be of use in finding out the direction the smugglers had taken. He had not yet had time to become acquainted with the inland part of the neighbourhood, or he would have known that, by dashing across the park in a northerly direction, he could have reached the village before the soldiers, who had to follow the windings of the road.

As it was, when he reached the first of the straggling cottages of the picturesque Sussex

village, the horsemen were out of sight ; and the women and children of the neighbourhood seemed to be all at their doors and windows, evidently discussing the recent invasion with boisterous mirth.

As Tregenna was not in uniform, he flattered himself that he might go up the village unrecognized, and perhaps obtain some scraps of valuable information ; but whether they were better posted up than he supposed, or whether the mere sight of a stranger awoke suspicion in the shrewd women-folk, it was certain that as soon as they caught sight of him they checked their volubility, and stood, with their hands on their hips, staring at him with broad amusement still on their faces, or else dropped a curtsey with demure and sudden respectfulness, which was in itself somewhat suspicious.

However, he thought he would make at least an attempt to obtain some information. So he addressed himself to a coarse-featured woman who might have been any age between twenty-five and forty-five, who stood wiping her hands on her apron at the door of one of

the cottages, and who, by the curtesy she dropped and the good-humoured expression of her face, seemed to promise that she would at least give a civil answer.

"Was that a troop of soldiers I caught sight of coming into the village?" asked he, as indifferently as possible, when he had returned her salutation with deferential courtesy.

"Maybe it were, sir," replied the woman promptly, with demure cheerfulness; "but I doan't rightly know. I were out at back yonder when I heard the noise." She glanced out of the corners of her eyes at an older woman outside the door of the next cottage. "Old Jenny yonder can tell ye more'n me, sir," added she slyly; "she's been there all the toime."

Tregenna, concealing the mortification he felt, turned to Jenny.

But her stolid face offered little hope of success.

"Ay," said she, in a voice like a man's, "I've been sittin' an' standin' about here, I 'ave, all mornin'; but I han't seen naught."

"You haven't seen a waggon full of

smugglers, maybe, coming through at full gallop?" cried Tregenna, losing all patience with the mendacious females. "Nor a troop of soldiers after them?"

But the sarcasm was lost upon the good lady, who was chewing a quid of tobacco, which he well knew to be contraband.

"Noa, I han't seen aught o' that," she replied imperturbably, looking him steadily in the eyes the while. "Maybe I were in a dose, sir, or had the sun in my eyes as they passed."

He did not trust himself to speak to her again, but went on up the village, between the groups of straggling red cottages with their thatched roofs overgrown with moss or lichen, noting everywhere the sidelong looks cast at him by such of the women as did not shut themselves in their cottages at his approach.

The very urchins, chubby boys of eight and nine, grinned at him maliciously, and helped to give him confirmation of the fact that he was in an enemy's country.

When the ground began to rise again, at the end of the village, he came to a point

where three roads met, and where the high hedges and another patch of wooded ground made it impossible to see far in any direction. As all three roads were in a most villainous condition, with deep ruts and pools and furrows of caked mud, and as all three bore marks of horses' hoofs, the lieutenant knew that it was useless to go further. So he returned through the village in a highly irritated state of mind.

The excitement had subsided a little by this time, and most of the gossips had resumed their household occupations. There was a group of suspicious-looking loafers about the door of each of the two inns; but although it seemed to Tregenna that the word smuggler was writ large across the bloated features of every one, there was nothing to be done but to look as if he ignored their existence.

Thus, in the very worst of humours, he again reached the entrance of the village, and, after a moment's hesitation, struck up to the left in the direction of the Parsonage, at the garden gate of which he saw handsome Mistress Joan in conversation with another woman.



He was still ostensibly bound on a mission of inquiry, yet it is doubtful whether he hoped to get much information from Joan, who had clearly shown herself to be one of the enemy. Still he strode up the hill with a resolute step, and saluted her in the most abrupt, business-like, and even somewhat offended manner.

"Your pardon, Mistress Joan, for intruding. But 'tis in the performance of my duty. Can you inform me whither the smugglers be gone that rode by just now with the soldiers after them?"

"How should I be able to tell you that, sir? Do you take me for a smuggler myself?" asked Joan, demurely.

He did not at once answer. The girl looked even handsomer, so it seemed to him, in the dying light of day than she had done by the light of moon and lantern on the preceding evening. The creamy tints of her skin melted into bright carnation on her cheeks; and he thought, with a flash of amusement, of the strictures of the powdered and painted ladies of Hurst Court upon her rustic complexion. Her dress, too, pleased his taste better than theirs

had done. She wore neither hood nor cap, and her abundant brown hair was rolled back from her forehead in a style which was, at that period somewhat old-fashioned, but which gave infinitely more dignity to the head than the tightly screwed-up knot of the fashionable ladies. She wore no hoop or next to none, and her full skirt, of some sort of grey homespun, fell in graceful folds round her. A long fine white apron reached to the hem of her dress, and her bodice was adorned with a frilled kerchief of soft white muslin, and with full gathers of muslin just below the elbow. The dress was neat, simple, eminently fresh and becoming.

Perhaps Tregenna's masculine eye did not take in all these details; but he was conscious that the whole effect was pleasing beyond anything feminine he had ever seen, and vastly superior to the modish charms of the Hurst Court ladies. He gave himself, however, little time for these reflections before a glance at the house behind her suggested to him a thought which he immediately put into the most matter-of-fact words.

“You stand high here, madam ; that tower to the east of your house will give you a view over many miles. Will you favour me with your permission to go up thither for a few minutes, that I may take a reconnaissance of the country ?”

By the startled look which instantly came into Joan's grey eyes, by the crimson flush which mounted to her forehead, Tregenna saw, to his intense annoyance, another proof that her sympathy with his foes went beyond the passive stage.

“Oh, you can't go into the tower, sir ; at least——” She hesitated a moment, evidently looking for an excuse, and then went on——“at least, in my father's absence. If you will come hither to-morrow, or—or——” Tregenna noticed that at this point she sought the eyes of the woman with whom she had been talking, and who had withdrawn respectfully to a distance of some paces on his approach. “Or the day after. 'Tis a fair view, certainly, when there's no mist on the marshes ; but hardly worth the trouble of climbing our staircase, which is encumbered by much lumber of my

father's," she ended somewhat lamely, but recovering her composure.

Tregenna did not at once answer, but he glanced at the house with a scrutinizing eye. The western portion of the building, which was most modest in dimensions, had been the banqueting-hall of a mansion as far back as the time of King John. It had since that time gone through many vicissitudes, and was now divided into small chambers, with the ancient king-post of the banqueting-hall spreading its wide beams through the upper storey. On the east side of the dwelling an addition had been made, taller than the more ancient portion, and crowned by a gabled roof of red tiles.

Over the whole house there hung a rich mantle of glossy dark ivy, which had grown into a massive tree over the more ancient part, and stretched its twining branches as far as the higher roof of the newer portion, leaving little to be seen of the structure but the windows, the knotted panes of which glistened like huge dewdrops in the setting sun.

Tregenna drew himself up. He took it for granted she did not intend him to use the

Parsonage as a watch-tower, to descry the course the smugglers had taken.

"You are afraid, I suppose," said he sharply, "that I might find out the direction in which lie the haunts of 'free-trade?'"

Joan drew herself up in her turn. "Nay, sir," said she quietly, "those haunts are reached by now, I doubt not; and your friends the soldiers will ere long be returning."

"May be with a few of *your* friends, the free-traders, at their saddle-bow, madam," retorted the lieutenant hotly.

"Sir, you are insulting," said Joan.

"Nay, madam, there is no inference to be drawn from your speech and behaviour in this matter but the one I draw."


"I wish you a good evening, sir," replied Joan, as, flashing upon him one look of indignant pride from her great brown eyes, she made him a most stately curtesy, with her arms folded across and her head erect, and sailed back into the house between the holly-bushes and the clipped yews.

There was nothing for Tregenna to do but to retire, after having returned her curtesy with

a deep bow of corresponding stiffness. As he turned to descend the hill, he had to pass the woman who had been talking with Joan, and who had made way for him to converse with the young lady. He glanced at her in passing, but noted only that she was apparently of the small-farmer class, youngish rather than young, with a quiet, stolid country face, and sinewy, rustic hands and arms.

Her dress was that of her class, consisting of a thick dark stuff skirt drawn through the placket-holes, a coarse white apron, frilled white cap, a kerchief knotted on the breast, and long, close mittens. She wore buckled shoes with stout heels, and carried a big basket on her arm.

There was altogether nothing more remarkable about her than an air of extreme cleanliness, neatness, and dignified respectability. She dropped a curtsy to the gentleman as he went by, which he returned with a touch of the hat and a curt "Good evening." He was in no mood for any unnecessary exchange of civilities; for he judged by the glance Joan had thrown in the direction of this woman that, demurely



respectable as she looked, she shared the universal sympathy with the wrong-doers whom it was his mission to root out of the land.

He had scarcely reached the bottom of the hill by the lane which formed an acute angle with the village street, when the soldiers, with the brigadier at their head, came trooping slowly through the village on their return journey. Alas! they had no captured outlaws at their bridle; they looked tired, hot, dispirited; their commander was swearing lustily, after the military fashion of the times; and the women of the village, keen-witted enough to guess that the squadron would be in an ill-humour, kept within doors, and satisfied their curiosity by furtive peeps from behind the drapery of their windows.

The brigadier perceived the lieutenant, called "Halt," in a guttural voice, to his men, and proceeded to unfold his grievances, with a plentiful interlarding of strange oaths.


It was the old story that Tregenna knew so well: nobody had seen the smugglers; nobody had heard them; nobody had the least idea

that there were such people about, or could give a suggestion as to the way they had gone.

"Ods my life, sir, we got to the river through following what I took for their trail; but there was no bridge, and I knew no means of getting across it, since the water appeared to be high, and the stream swift. So, sir, the d——d rascals may e'en be at t'other end of the county by this, and curse me if I see how they're to be got at, when every wench and every child in the place is on their side—damme!"

While he thus railed on, Tregenna became suddenly aware that he had an attentive listener in the person of the respectable-looking woman with the basket, who had evidently followed the lieutenant down the hill, and who now stood close to the bridle of the brigadier's charger, whose nose she presently began to caress with her broad brown hand.

The brigadier, incensed by what he considered a piece of gross impertinence on the part of one of the country-folk, drew back his horse with a jerk, and uttered an oath, bursting the next moment into a not very refined reproof





for her temerity. The woman remained however entirely unmoved by it, and as the horse retreated, she followed him up, until she again stood close to the bit he was champing.

"May I make so bold as give him a drink of water, sir?" asked she, in a pleasant, deep voice, with less of the rough country accent than one would have expected from her. "Sure you've had a long, hard ride, and one should be merciful to one's beast."

Tregenna glanced at her with more interest than before. When she spoke, there was a certain quiet authority about her, most proper to the mistress of a farmhouse; and he perceived that she was younger by some years than he had supposed, not more than eight and twenty perhaps, and that her features, though not handsome, had a homely attraction of their own when animated by the action of speaking.

The brigadier, who, true to his profession, looked upon himself as a rake of the first water, cocked his hat, put his hand to his side, and leered at her with a roguish air, which was, in truth, not so fascinating in a gentleman of his

portly build and purplish complexion as he fancied.

"You wenches in these parts are kinder to the beasts than to their riders, egad!" said he, with a shake of the head that set his bob-wig wagging merrily. "You don't offer me a drink; and if I was to beg such a favour of you as a word to tell me where to find the smugglers, I'll be sworn you'd give me a stare like the rest of 'em, and vow you'd never heard of the creatures!"

The woman listened to him with modest gravity, her face quite stolid, her eyes on the horse. Then she said, in a quiet, even tone, without either prudery or coquetry, but with an air of being much interested by what he said—

"Well, sir, I'm not going to tell you that. I know to my cost the things that go on in these parts, and that there's many a man ruined for an honest calling by being drawn in with these folks. You see, sir, it be in the air, and they breathe it in from childhood up, so to speak."

"That's it; that's it, my good woman!" cried

the brigadier enthusiastically. "Egad, my lass, you're the first person I've met in these parts to admit even so much. Now tell me, think you not 'twould be better for you all if this thing, this free-trade, as they falsely call it, was rooted out?"

"Ay, sir, I do think so," said the woman earnestly. "And if I thought you'd do your work without too rough a hand, I'd lead you to their haunts myself."

"You would? You would?" cried the brigadier, with great eagerness. "Well, then, you may rely on me. If you'll but take me to the spot where they harbour, I'll be as gentle as a lamb with the ruff—I should say, with the poor misguided fellows."

"Come, sir, then, with me," said the woman, as she at once began to lead the way back through the village at a smart pace.

The brigadier turned his horse, and commanded his men to follow, and in a few minutes every horseman was again lost to sight at the bend of the road.

Lieutenant Tregenna, who had heard this colloquy, had been inclined to think, from the

woman's manner, that in her indeed they had got hold of a decent-minded person who had no sympathy with the thieves.

But happening to glance up at the latticed window under the eaves of the nearest cottage, he caught sight of two faces, a man's and a woman's, in convulsions of laughter. A cursory examination of such other windows as were near enough for him to see revealed similar phenomena.

And the question darted into his mind : Was the respectable-looking woman a friend of the smugglers? And was it her intention to lead the soldiers into an ambushade?

## CHAPTER IV.

### FRESH OUTRAGES.

TREGENNA debated with himself whether he should run after the brigadier and put him on his guard. But a moment's reflection convinced him that a word of warning from a young man like himself would be received with resentment rather than with gratitude by the old soldier. After all, the soldiers were well armed, and were presumably prepared for emergencies.

So he turned his back on the village, and made his way over the cliffs to the creek where the gig was lying to take him to the cutter.

It was at the mouth of the little ravine down which Parson Langney and his daughter had gone on the preceding evening.

It was dark in this cleft between the sandstone hills, dark and cool, with a breeze that rushed through from the sea and whistled in

the scrubby pines and through the arching briars of the blackberry bushes. The stream which flowed swiftly down, making little trickling waterfalls from rock to rock, was swollen by recent rains, and made little patches of morass and mire at every few steps. The lieutenant found the water over his ankles half a dozen times on his way down. He had just come in sight of the opening where the gig lay when, drawing his right foot out of a mossy swamp that squelched under his tread, he saw, with a sudden chill, that his boot was dyed a deep, murky red.

Scenting another outrage, he uttered an exclamation, and looked about him. Trickling down the side of the ravine into the mud and water of the little patch of swamp was a dark red stream—and the stream was blood.

He uttered a cry, a call; no one answered. The next moment he was scrambling up the side of the ravine.

At the top, lying in a patch of gorse that fringed the edge of the broken cliff, was the body of a coastguardsman, his head nearly severed from his body, and with the blood still

oozing from the ghastly wound which had killed him.

The poor fellow's hands and limbs were ice cold ; he had been dead some time. A sheath-knife, such as sailors use, apparently the weapon with which the murder had been effected, lay among the bushes a few paces off.

The lieutenant ground his teeth. Not thieves alone, but murderers, were these wretches with whom the whole country-side was in league. He picked up the knife, with the dried blood upon it ; there was a name scratched roughly on the blade, " Ben Bax." It was a name new to Tregenna, and strong as the clue seemed, it inspired him with but faint hopes of bringing the murderer to punishment. The whole neighbourhood would conspire to shield the author of the outrage ; the very fact of the knife, with the name on it, having been left behind, showed with what cynical impunity the wretches went about their work.

However, here was at last a deed which not even Squire Waldron could excuse, not even Joan Langney could palliate. The man was dead ; there was nothing to be done for him.

But information must be given of the murder without delay.

Tregenna was near enough to the gig to hail the men in charge of it, and these hurried up to the spot without delay.

They knew of the raid, but not of the murder. During the lieutenant's absence a suspicious-looking sloop had been sighted at anchor some little distance away. A watch had been kept upon her from the cutter, and a boat seen to push off and make for the marshes.

The cutter's crew had manned a boat and given chase, only to find that they had been drawn off in pursuit of a decoy craft, containing nothing contraband, while the men remaining on the cutter had the mortification to see a second boat, piled high with kegs and full of smugglers armed to the teeth, row up the creek, land crew and cargo, and then return to the sloop, exchanging shots with the cutter's men, without effect on either side.

The cutter's men, however, had seen nothing of the murder, for the irregularities of the ground and the scrubby undergrowth of gorse and bramble had hidden the struggle from



their sight, though, but for this circumstance, the spot would have been within the range of their telescopes.

Lieutenant Tregenna lost not a moment in returning to Hurst, to report the outrage to Squire Waldron, whose lenity could not afford to excuse such a barbarous act as this on the part of his free-traders.

He went by the shortest way this time, taking the foot-track over the hills, by which Parson Langney and his daughter had come on the previous night.

Perhaps the ghastly sight he had just witnessed had sharpened his faculties; for before he had gone far over the worn grass of the path he caught sight of some marks which arrested his attention. Stooping to look at them, and then kneeling on the short turf, peering closely at the ground, he soon satisfied himself that the marks were bloodstains, and that they followed the course he was taking.

Feeling sure that he was on the track of another piece of the free-traders' sanguinary work, he went back on his steps, and traced the bloodstains to a thicket by the side of the

footpath, where there were traces, in broken branches and down-trodden bracken, of the wounded creature, whether man or animal, having hidden or rested.

And then it flashed suddenly across his mind that it was near this spot that the smuggler must have stood at whom he himself had, on the previous evening, fired with what he had believed at the time to be good effect.

If this were so, and if this were the trail of the wounded man, he might be able, by following it up, to find at least one of the guilty fraternity, and bring him to justice.

Fired with this belief, which was like a ray of golden hope in the black despair which had been settling on him, he turned again, and following the track of the bloodstains, which were dry, although evidently recent, he went steadily on in the direction of Hurst, looking always on the ground, and not noticing at first whither the track was leading him.

It was with a start and a sudden chill that he presently recognized, on raising his head when the ground began to rise, that it was to the Parsonage that the marks led.

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To the Parsonage—where he had stood talking to Joan Langney that afternoon! For a moment he felt sick, and faltered in his purpose. He did not want to bring shame, disgrace, upon that house of all others. Yet what was to be done? If she and her father were indeed harbouring one of the ferocious pack with whom he and his men had been in conflict on the preceding night, why should he hesitate to accuse them of the fact, and to demand that the rascal should be handed over to justice?

He was sorry to have to do it, almost passionately sorry; for even Joan's prevarication, her defence of the outlaws, her defiance of himself, had not availed to destroy the admiration he felt for the handsome, fearless maiden who was her father's right hand, and who was ready to dare all dangers in the cause of what she considered her duty.

But, then, there was his own duty to be considered. And that demanded that he should seize the smallest clue to the authors of the outrages which followed one another thick and fast, and showed an almost inconceivable audacity on the part of the smugglers.

He marched, therefore, after a few minutes hesitation, boldly upwards, and following the track of the bloodstains still, found himself, in a few minutes, not at the front of the house, where he had been that morning, but at a garden-gate at the back.

He lifted the latch and entered. The bloodstains were faintly visible in the dusk, on the gravel of the path that took him up to the back door of the house.


And there, on the very doorstep, was a keg of contraband brandy.

The sight of this gave Tregenna fresh nerve ; and he knocked with his cane loudly at the door.

It was opened by Joan herself.

It was almost dark by this time ; but he saw the look of horror and dismay which flashed across her face when she saw who her visitor was. Her glance passed quickly to the keg on the step below, but only for a moment. Then, without appearing to notice that very suspicious article, she addressed Tregenna, not discourteously, but with decided coldness.

“What is your pleasure, sir? Are you come to see my father? He is not yet returned.”



"I am not come to see your father, madam, but another person who is harbouring beneath this roof; the smuggler who is taking refuge here from the consequences of his ill deeds."

She was taken by surprise, and the look which crossed her candid face betrayed her.

"'Tis in vain for you to deny it, madam," pursued Tregenna, boldly, "for I have proof of what I say."

There was a short pause, and then Joan said steadily—

"I do not deny it."

Certain as he had felt of the truth of his surmise, Tregenna felt that his breath was taken away for a moment by this cool confession. He was shocked, grieved, through all the triumph he felt at having, as he thought, at last run his prey to earth.

"You deny not, madam," he went on, in an altered voice, "that you have beneath your roof a thief, and if not a murderer, at least an associate and accomplice of murderers?"

"A murderer! No, I will not believe that," cried Joan, warmly.

"Well, a smuggler, if that name please you

better, though in truth there's mighty little difference between them. I am come, then, madam, to see this smuggler, and to endeavour to find out whether he is the man that cruelly stabbed to death a poor coastguardsman but a couple or so of hours ago."


"It was not he," said Joan, hastily. "He hath been here since last night."

"Ah! then he was engaged in the fight with us last night; and 'twas he, doubtless, whom I shot in the leg as he got away."

"And is not the wound, think you, sir, a sufficient injury to have inflicted on him, that you must relentlessly track him down for fresh punishment?"

"Madam, 'tis no matter of personal feeling; 'tis in the king's name, and on the king's behalf, I charge you to give him up to justice."

"Then, in the name of justice and of humanity, I refuse!" said Joan, passionately, as she threw her handsome head back, and fixed upon him a look of proud defiance. "The man who takes shelter in my father's house, should be safe there, were he the greatest criminal on earth; and how much



more when he comes bleeding from a wound inflicted by the men who should be our protectors!"

Exasperated as Tregenna was by the difficulties which she put in his way, he could not help admiring her spirit. He answered more mildly than he would have done had her defiant speech been uttered by another mouth—

"Nay, madam, you will not suffer us to protect you from the wrong-doers and their works; you side with them, against us and the law!"

"Who is that talks of the law?" cried a cheery voice from the narrow hall behind Joan.

And Parson Langney, in a very genial mood, having but just returned from Hurst Court and the merrymakers there, presented himself at the doorway, where his daughter made way for him.

"You have a smuggler here, sir, whom I beg you to give up to justice," said Tregenna. "I can prove that he hath taken a foremost part in a raid and a fight with my men; and sure Miss Joan may rest satisfied with what

you have done for him, and let justice take its course now."

The parson glanced at his daughter with a change of countenance—


"Well," said he, "the soldiers are at Hurst Court; bring them hither, and make a search of my house, if you please. You will find but a poor fellow that lies sick with a wound in his leg. I fear me poor Tom will never live to take his trial if he be moved from where he lies with the fever that is on him now."

"He shall be used with all gentleness, sir, I promise you. And sorry am I to have to intrude upon you and your kind charity in this manner. But you are aware, sir, that I must do my duty."

"Ay, sir, as we do ours," replied the parson, sturdily. "We ask not what a man has done when he comes to us for help. We ask but what we can do for him, be he friend or be he foe."

"I know it, sir. I have experienced your kindness—and Mistress Joan's."

The young lady now stood a little in the background, looking anxious and perturbed.





She hardly glanced at him when he uttered her name.

"You will pardon me, sir, for being forced to incommode you thus."

"You must do your duty, sir," retorted Parson Langney, dryly.

"And you will admit us when we come with a warrant?"

"Ay, sir."

Tregenna bowed and withdrew. Halfway down the garden path he heard a noise behind him, and turned. Parson Langney was busy rolling the keg of brandy into his house. On meeting the lieutenant's eyes, the parson, hardly pausing in his labour, sang out with much simplicity—

"'Tis but the physician's fee, sir. And sure, the labourer is worthy of his hire!"

And with that, he gave the keg a final roll, got it within doors, and drew the bolt.

## CHAPTER V.


## A LOAD OF HAY.

LIEUTENANT TREGENNA was quite prepared to find the gentlemen at Hurst Court in a very merry mood, after the hours which they had spent at the dinner-table since his abrupt departure.

He sent in his message that his business was urgent, and chose to wait in the great hall, with the staghounds sniffing about his ankles, rather than have to discuss small-talk with the ladies, as the old butler wished him to do.

In a few minutes Squire Waldron, not very steady as to gait, or clear as to utterance, came out of the dining-parlour, followed by the brigadier, who was less coherent still.

The news of the murder of the coastguardsman, however, startled them both into sobriety; and the squire made less difficulty than



Tregenna had expected about making out a warrant for the apprehension of the one man whom he had tracked down.

"What's his name, say you?" asked the squire, who had conducted his companions into the study, through the walls of which they could hear the stertorous snoring of the other guests, who had fallen asleep, whether upon or under the table Tregenna could only guess.

"I know only that he is called Tom," replied Tregenna, who remembered that the parson had uttered that name.

"Ah, then 'twill be 'Gardener Tom,' as they call him, as fine a lad as ever you clapped eyes on," almost sighed the squire, as he began to make out the warrant, not without erasures, in a decidedly 'after-dinner' handwriting. "Poor Tom, poor Tom! You will not have him moved to-night, general, and jolt a man in a fever across the marshes to Rye?"

"Egad, squire, since he will certainly be hanged, what signifies a jog more or less to his rascally bonesh?" retorted the brigadier ferociously.

The warrant made out, and the soldiers

summoned from the servant's hall, where they had been regaled by the squire's command, the lieutenant and the brigadier took leave of their host, and started from the house without loss of time, Tregenna keeping pace on foot with the officer's charger, while the soldiers followed.

The brigadier was in the highest spirits, and was inclined to look down upon Tregenna's capture, and upon his methods of work.

"S'no use, my lad, no mortal use," he said, laying down the law with vigour, and trying to sit straight upon the saddle so that his gesticulating arm should not overbalance him, "to try t' get on in anything without th' women! Now, I alwaysh make up to th' women!" he went on, with a wink and a roguish leer; "and they're going to pull me through thish time, as they've done a hundred timesh afore! Did you see me with that lass?" he went on, resting his hand upon his hip, and cocking his hat knowingly. "That lass that went up the village with me?"

"A decent-looking woman, that has the appearance of a farmer's wife or daughter?" said Tregenna, somewhat dryly.

"Ay, that's she. Name's Ann Price,

keepsh house for her brother, who's a farmer living a little way inland yonder. Forget name of place. Squire told me all about her. Fine woman, sir; doosed fine woman; sh'perior woman, too, monstrous sh'perior. She's going to put me on the track of the beggars; took me up the hill, and showed me the way to one of their haunts, that she did, sir. Though in these parts one wouldn't have thought she'd ha' dared do it, sir; and she wouldn't if I hadn't known how to wheedle it out of her!"

"You don't think, general, she was playing you false?"

"False! No, sir. I'm too devilish artful to be played tricks with. No, sir; I played with her as a cat plays with a mouse, and led her on so far that she can't draw back. She is to come and see me at my quarters in Rye next market day, and—" he paused a moment to give a fatuous chuckle—"if I don't get out of her afore she goes back every damned thing I want to know, why, sir, then they may court-martial me for a d-d-d-damned blunderer, sir!"

Tregenna did not attempt to betray further his doubts as to the woman's good faith. But

when they reached the angle where the road through the village was joined by the by-road up to the Parsonage, and he saw a woman's figure which he thought he recognized at the door of one of the cottages, he dropped behind, and let the brigadier, who had the warrant, and the soldiers, go up to the Parsonage without him.

As he had supposed, the woman who had attracted his attention proved indeed to be Ann Price, who now wore a long round cloak of full pleats, with a hood attached to it, and who appeared to be waiting for some one.

It was so dark by this time that the poor oil-lamp over the door of the little thatched inn opposite made a small patch of light in the miry roadway ; into this patch, while the woman still stood waiting, and Tregenna watched her, came, reeling from the inn-door, a tall, brawny, muscular man, in a rough fisherman's dress, wearing on his head the long, knitted, tasselled cap of his kind. He had a couple of huge pistols stuck in his belt, which showed under the flaps of his loose, open coat ; and his whole appearance betrayed the unmistakable fact that

he was no peaceful seafarer, but an active participator in the contraband trade of the neighbourhood.

Crossing the road with an unsteady gait, and uttering the while a chuckling, coarse laugh, he made his way towards the woman, who, by a quick movement, avoided his close approach.

"Why, Ann, my lass, what's to do that thou'rt grown too nice to give a greeting to a friend, and thy cousin to boot? Is't for yon knave Tom thou'rt grieving? Ods life, but he's no fit match for thee; thou'lt never wed with a landsman, thou, when there's a better man ready, eh, lass?"

And with that he steadied himself, ran towards her, intercepted her as she would have gone through the alley between the cottages, and seized her roughly by the cloak.

"Coom, lass, no airs with me!" he said, in an angry tone, as she tried to wrench her cloak away from his grasp. "Thou canst keep thy coyness for the soldier-chaps."

"Have done, Ben!" cried Ann, imperiously, but in a low voice. "Dost want to have the soldiers after thee? They're nigh enough!"

"What care I for the fules in red? or thou either, cousin Ann? Come, now, one kiss, lass, and I'll be gone."

Seeing that the man, who was a hulking rascal some six feet high, and broad in proportion, was plainly preparing to take by force what he could not get by coaxing, Tregenna hurried up to rescue the woman from her too persistent admirer.

To his surprise, however, before he came up with the disputants, Ann suddenly struck out with her right fist straight from the shoulder, caught the unsteady Ben unawares, and landed him flat on his back in the mud in the middle of the road.

"Well done!" cried Tregenna, involuntarily, below his breath.

"Get up, Ben!" cried Ann, as it were apologetically, and without the least resentment. "Thou shouldst not ha' crossed me, lad."

Ben was sitting up, and swearing the most appalling oaths. Perceiving Tregenna, and hearing his ejaculation, he was seized with a sudden access of brutal ferocity; and with a yell of rage he clapped his hand to his belt, drew



out one of the huge pistols he wore, and, pointing it at the lieutenant, would have fired at him, if Ann had not sprung into the middle of the roadway with astounding agility, and jerked up the weapon.

"Up, up!" cried she, in a low voice; "up and begone. You must do no more mischief to-night."

Ben continued to swear, but he obeyed her, getting up slowly and with difficulty, and meekly suffering her to strip off his coat, which she put into his hands, telling him to get the hostess of the Frigate to cleanse it for him. This command also he took with docility; but once more catching sight of Tregenna as he turned to re-enter the inn, he shook his fist at him, and growled out something which sounded like a threat of settling arrears between them on some future occasion.

When he had disappeared within the hospitable doors of the Frigate, whence issued a great noise of singing, shouting, and hoarse laughter, Ann turned with some appearance of impatience to the lieutenant.

"Why are you not with your friends, the

soldiers, searching the parson's house, yonder?" she asked shortly.

He did not tell her the truth, that he was suspicious of her, and was keeping watch on her movements, wondering for whom she was waiting. He only said—

"There are enough of them to perform that simple office. And I am loath to incommode Mistress Joan, by forcing upon her more intruders than can do the task there is to do."

"Nay, then, you should return to your ship, sir; for there be a wild sort of characters about to-night, and none too sober. Your person is known, too, and you may chance to get a bullet through you, which will further neither the king's cause nor your own, I reckon."

"I thank you for the advice, mistress," said Tregenna, who was more interested in this grave woman with the quiet manners, low voice, and tranquil air of authority, the more he saw of her. "But 'tis my business to carry my life in my hand; and truly the vicinity of a woman as quick of eye and ready of hand as yourself is as safe a one as I could wish."

But Ann Price shook her head. "I might



not always be so fortunate," said she. "Besides, I must be stirring myself. I have another two miles to trudge to get to my mother's home."

"If my escort would be any protection to you, which, perhaps, you would deny, methinks 'twould be less hazardous than a walk across a wild road alone."

Dark as it was; for the light given by the moon was as yet but faint, and the inn's oil-lamp scarcely threw its light so far as the place where they stood, Tregenna fancied he saw a smile on her face. She answered quite gravely, however—

"I shall not walk, I thank you, sir. I have a load of hay to take home; and yonder, as I think, comes the cart with it. I'll bid you a good-night, sir."

She was looking up the road, and listening, Tregenna heard the creaking of wheels; but he did not take her hint to retreat; he followed her, as she went to meet the cart, which was at that moment descending into the main street by a narrow lane behind the cottages on the right. He was suspicious of that cart with its load of hay.

There was a great difficulty in getting the heavy wheels out of the mire of the lane ; and Ann hurried to the assistance of the young boy who was leading the horse. At the same moment, the brigadier, cursing loud and deep, came at a smart pace down the hill from the Parsonage.


"They've tricked us! They're a set of rascally thieves!" yelled he, as soon as he caught sight of Tregenna. "Your parson and his daughter are in league with the smugglers, damn them!"

"Why, what—what mean you, general?"

"We've searched the house, from garret to cellar ; and devil a ghost of a smuggler is there in the place."

Tregenna glanced quickly from the brigadier to the hay-cart, which was just clear of the lane. As he did so, he was on the point of suggesting to the brigadier that he and his soldiers should follow that vehicle, when he was stopped by seeing Ann Price raise her arm, while, at the same moment, she hailed him in a clear voice—

"Sir, one moment! Will you come hither, sir?"



It was plainly Tregenna whom she addressed. It is doubtful whether the brigadier even recognized his charmer of the daylight hours, for the frown did not lift from his brows, neither did he salute her in any way.

Tregenna, with a word to his companion, returned quickly to the woman's side.

"Maybe, sir," said she, in the same low, level voice as before, "you would not mind if I use my sex's privilege, and beg you'll be so good as come with me as far as the ford. The roads be monstrous bad, and I've but this little lad with me, to help me at a pinch to get the cart along."

Tregenna assented at once; though by no means so confiding or so self-confident as the brigadier, and well aware that there was something rather uncanny, rather mysterious, about this woman who could fell a man like an ox while addressing him with lamb-like gentleness; he was too young, too full-blooded, not to relish the adventure, and was quite ready to face the danger into which she might lead him.

His first idea had been that the cartful of hay was merely a receptacle for contraband

goods, and it had been his intention to make this suggestion to the brigadier. But this request on the part of the woman that he should accompany her on her drive, necessarily put that notion out of his head.

He got up beside her, the boy mounted behind, and they started on their journey, jogging through the miry, rutty roads at a snail's pace, with the lantern swinging on the off-side of the cart with every motion of the vehicle.

They went so slowly, and the cart was so uncomfortable from the lack of springs, that the journey would have been miserably tedious but for the interest Tregenna felt in the woman herself, an interest which increased tenfold as he listened to her conversation.

She was very frank, very straightforward, and made no more pretence than she had done to the brigadier of being shocked by the doings of the smugglers.

"They've been brought up to it like to a trade," said she, "and it's passed from father to son. And when duties be high, so I've heard say, the free-traders start up from the



ground like to mushrooms. And look, sir, be they so much to blame as the folks that buy their goods from them, and that think no harm of getting goods cheap, seeing that, after all, defrauding a Government never seems like the same thing as defrauding a man? Governments doan't seem to be flesh and blood like to ourselves, do they, sir?"

"Well, maybe not. But still——"

"Still, it brings it home to us that 'tis a crime to smuggle when the king sends down a troop of redcoats to shoot us down, sir. Ah, yes, sir, I'm not defending 'em, though there's many a good-hearted lad among them; ay, and some of my own kin too, I'm main sorry to tell."

"Surely they'll not be so foolhardy as to continue in these ways, now that they must do it at such fearsome risk!" urged Tregenna.


"Nay, sir, I know not. But 'twould be a fair day for Sussex if you could but get the men to give it up, and to take to honester work again."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when the cart sank down into a small morass

with such a jerk that Tregenna, less used to this type of vehicle than his companions, was all but precipitated into the road. At the same moment a slight groan from the back part of the cart struck upon his ears, and startled him considerably.

All at once it flashed into his mind that it was not a load of contraband tobacco and spirits, laces and silks that the hay was concealing, but the wounded smuggler Tom, who had eluded the brigadier, escaping by the back way from the Parsonage on the approach of the soldiers. Almost at the same moment he realized why it was that Ann Price had shown such a sudden desire for his own company. The artful woman had guessed his suspicions of herself and her load of hay, and had invited Tregenna to put him off the scent, and to avoid having her vehicle overhauled by the soldiers.

He took care not to betray, by word or sign, that he had heard that groan from the wounded man; he went on talking to Ann, getting her opinions on agricultural topics, which she gave with characteristic intelligence. And all the while he was congratulating himself that he





should find out where Tom lived, and be able to follow him up and bring him to justice.

There was another thing that he wished to find out: whether the tipsy smuggler whom Ann Price had treated so cavalierly was the "Ben Bax" whose knife he had found beside the murdered coastguardsman. He put the question to her direct—

"Was that fellow who affronted you in the street yonder the man they call 'Ben Bax'?" he asked at the first convenient opening in their conversation.

But Ann, whether she knew the reason of his question or not, was cautious in her answer.

"Maybe," she answered, as if indifferently, "there be plenty o' Baxes in these parts; they're in every village. I know not whether I ever heard yonder fellow called by any other name than 'Ben the Blast.'"

"He's a fisherman, I suppose, by his dress?" pursued Tregenna.

She gave him a straight look, turning her head stolidly towards him to do so.

"He's mate of a merchantman, I think," said she. "We don't see much of him up here,

and we shouldn't mind if we saw less. He's a rough fellow, and free with his fists when he's in liquor."

"It seems you know how to manage him, however," said Tregenna.

Ann only smiled. And Tregenna, who saw that she meant to let him know no more, allowed the subject to drop.

They had by this time jogged some distance out of the village, and were descending a slope towards the river.

"We shall have to cross the water by the ford," said she. "You're not afraid, sir, to do it in the dark?"

"Not with you," answered Tregenna, promptly. "Have you much further to go, when the river is crossed?"

"Not above another mile," replied Ann. "And if you can't stay the night at the farm, sir, we can put you in the way of coming back by a path, a little higher up, where there's a ferry-boat to take you across."

"Thanks," replied Tregenna. "I wish I could avail myself of your hospitality, but I must return to my boat to-night."

They were descending the hill in the same jog-trot fashion, and were within a few yards of the river, which was flowing swiftly, and looked, Tregenna thought, somewhat perilous to negotiate, when Ann uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Mercy on me!" cried she, in a tone of great annoyance, "if I haven't dropped my whip! And it'll need all the lashing I can give her to get the mare across, with the river running as swift as it does to-night."

She had reined in the animal, and was peering round in the road with anxious eyes.

"Did you mind, sir, when I had it last? Nay, nay, for sure you don't. You'd have spoken if you'd seen it drop. Would you hold the reins a moment, sir, while I go back up the hill in search of it?"

"Nay, I'll do that," replied Tregenna, readily. "I'll take the lantern."

He had unfastened the great clumsy thing from the side of the vehicle while he spoke, and had already begun his search. He had almost reached the crest of the hill before he

found the whip, lying in a pool of mud under the hedge by the side of the road.

"Hey!" cried he, as he picked it up and cracked it in the air. "I've found it!"

As he turned, with the lantern in one hand, and the whip in the other, and looked down the hill towards the cart, he was astonished to see, by the light of the moon which had grown stronger since they started, the lad who had been at the back of the cart leap up to the seat beside Ann, with a long stick, cut from the hedge, in his hand.

The next moment, with a speed which, compared with her former jog-trot, was like that of an arrow from a bow, the mare was galloping towards the river, lashed unsparingly by her driver.

Pursuit was hopeless. Almost before Tregenna had time to recognize that he had been tricked, the cart, swaying, splashing, dashing through little eddies of foam, was in the middle of the stream.

He ran a few paces, stumbling in the ruts of the road, and muttering uncomplimentary things of the high-spirited lady and all her sex.

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But, long before he reached his side of the river the cart had gained the other, and was galloping along the road at a pace which put all thoughts of overtaking it to flight.

Disgusted, furious, and vowing vengeance against both Ann and smuggler Tom, Lieutenant Tregenna dashed the lantern on the ground, flung the whip into the middle of the stream, and returned towards the shore as fast as possible, taking a byway to the cliffs, lest any of Ann's friends should see him, and rejoice at his discomfiture.


## CHAPTER VI.

## A COLLISION.

ON the following day Tregenna sent word to General Hambledon that he had better search the neighbourhood of Rede Hall for "Gardener Tom," who had escaped him at the Parsonage on the previous evening.

But he had very little hope of any result ; and his fears were justified when, a few days later, he met the brigadier, who had, of course, been as completely fooled by the artful Ann as Tregenna himself had been.

Ann, whom the general had found with her arms in the wash-tub, placid, stolid, and as amiable as ever, had made profuse apologies for her behaviour to Tregenna, whom she professed herself ashamed to meet. She had had no idea, she said, that there was any one hidden in the cart until the lieutenant had got



out in search of the lost whip. Then a man had started up from under the hay, put a pistol to her head, and threatened her with instant death if she did not drive on, which she was thus forced to do. After crossing the river, he had jumped out at the first bend of the road, and she had no idea what had become of him.

Even the brigadier seemed to have his doubts about the entire truth of Ann's story; but Tregenna, who knew it was a tissue of falsehoods, said nothing. He perceived already that General Hambledon's precious plan of "getting hold of the women, my boy," only had the result of letting the women get hold of him.

Then there came a lull in the excitement of the times. Ben the Blast had disappeared from the neighbourhood, without Tregenna's having been able to identify him with the owner of the blood-stained knife. There were no more raids; there were no more discoveries; things seemed to have settled down, and it appeared impossible to suspect the peaceful-looking carters and ploughmen who went

stolidly about their work in the fields, looking as placid and unenterprising as their own oxen, of having had any hand in the lawless practices which the soldiers and the cutter's men had been sent to quell.

The cutter was generally cruising about, keeping a sharp look-out on the coast for suspicious-looking craft, so that Tregenna got very little time ashore. On the rare occasions when he did get as far inland as the village of Hurst, he always felt a longing to call at the Parsonage and twit Joan with her lawless behaviour in helping a criminal to escape.

He was returning to the shore one day, after paying a duty visit to Hurst Court, where the ladies' sympathy with him had been quite overwhelming, though he shrewdly guessed that their silken frocks had been cheaply come by, when he saw Mistress Joan, with a small flock of sheep before her, and a long osier wand in her hand, coming across the high ground from the marsh.

She instantly checked her pace, as if to give him an opportunity to pass before she and her flock came up with him. But he, of



course, checked his speed too, and raised his hat with a deep bow as soon as she came near.

Joan threw back the heavy folds of her hooded cloak, and curtsied politely, but with a certain stately bashfulness which showed that his anxiety to meet her had scarcely been reciprocated.

Tregenna, however, was not to be daunted. He could not help feeling a strong interest in the spirited young creature, and his heart had leapt up at the chance of speaking with her again.

"Turned shepherdess, I perceive, Mistress Joan!" said he, leaving the road to meet her as he spoke.

"And not a very skilful one, I fear," replied she, keeping her gaze fixed on the sheep, who showed a decided inclination to wander. "They belong to an old dame that lives on the edge of the marsh yonder; and I offered to bring them into the village, and to fold them for the night in our own meadow, that they might go to market to-morrow morning with those of a neighbour."

"May I not assist you in your task? 'Tis no easy one, I see."

"And have you no fear, sir, lest they should be the property of smugglers, or lest the wool which covers them be the receptacle of contraband goods, even as innocent hay may be?" asked she, with a certain demure mischief in her tone which piqued him.

"Well, madam, since you challenge me," retorted Tregenna, "I own I may have reason for such thoughts; for you have shown a marked tenderness, if I must say so, towards the breakers of the law, even to assisting a criminal to escape, that had a warrant out against him."

A change came over Joan's handsome face. The look of mutinous mischief in her eyes gave place to a certain wistful kindliness even more attractive. And she spoke in such a tender, pleading, gentle voice that, if Tregenna had harboured any resentful feelings towards her, he must have been disarmed.

"Ah, sir," said she, "it is hard for you to understand, and I doubt not we must seem perverse in your eyes. But do but place

yourself in imagination where we stand, and consider whether your own feelings would not be the same as ours, did you but live our life, and have your home among these poor folk as we have. Remember, sir, we have had our abode here since I was but an infant. When my mother died, and my father was left with me, a babe of but a few months old, on his hands, all the country-folk for miles round offered to nurse me, tend me, do what they could to help the pastor they already loved. I was taken to a farmhouse where this very Tom, whom we sheltered from your soldiers, was running about, a little lad who could scarce speak plain. He was my companion ere I could walk ; he would carry me in his arms to see the ducks in the pond, fetch me the early primroses, rock me to sleep in the cradle which was placed for warmth by the big farmhouse fireplace. Think you, sir, those are memories one can ever forget? Think you I would suffer the man who was my playmate all those years ago to be imprisoned, hanged, while I could put out a hand to save him? No, sir. Poor Tom's no villain. And even if he were, I would not give him up, no,

nor the sons and brothers of the kind-hearted women who tended me in my childhood !”

And Joan’s proud eyes flashed on him a look of passionate defiance, of noble enthusiasm, which for a moment struck him dumb.

“Madam,” he said at last, almost humbly, “’tis very true we cannot look upon these men, nay, nor even upon these deeds, with the same eyes. I only pray that you will make allowance for my point of view, as I do for yours ; and that you will suffer that we may be foes, if we must be foes, after the most indulgent manner.”

Joan, who had suffered her attention to be diverted from her troublesome charges during her harangue, now perceived that they had wandered some distance away. She therefore curtsied hastily to the lieutenant, and saying briefly, but with a merry laugh, “Ay, sir, we will be the most generous of foes !” she ran off to gather her flock together again.

Tregenna would have liked to follow and help her in her task, but he hardly dared, after the reception he had met with at her hands. Without being positively unfriendly, she had

been defiant, daring, audacious; she had let him see that there was a barrier between them which she, at least, regarded as insurmountable. And piqued more than ever, conscious that he admired her more than he had done before, Tregenna was obliged to turn reluctantly in the direction of the shore.

October had come, bringing with it a succession of misty evenings when the marshes were covered with a low-lying cloud of whitish vapour, while a grey haze hung over sea and shore, making it difficult to keep a proper look-out for smuggling craft, and for the experienced and cunning natives in charge of them.

Before Tregenna reached the creek where his boat was waiting, the sun was going down red on his right, over the land, while on every side, but especially on the left, where the marshes lay, the grey mist was getting thicker, the outlines of tree and rock, cottage and passing ship more blurred and faint.


He was but a few hundred yards from the creek when there came to his ears certain sounds, deadened and muffled by the fog, which woke him with a start to the sudden knowledge

that there was a conflict of some sort going on a little way off, in the direction of the marshes.

Shouts, oaths, the sharp report of a pistol, followed by a duller sound like that of blows or the fall of a heavy body ; all these struck upon his ears as he ran, at the top of his speed, in the direction whence the noise came.

It was at a point where the cliff dipped gradually, to rise again in one last frowning rock over the marshes beyond, that he came suddenly upon the combatants, and found, as he had expected, that he was in the midst of a fray between his own crew on the one hand and the smugglers on the other.

As he came over the crest of the hill towards the combatants, and, drawing his sword, shouted to the smugglers to surrender, hoping they might think he was supported by an approaching force behind, there arose out of the mist, from among the struggling, scuffling mass of cursing, fighting men, the figure of a lad, stalwart but supple, clothed in loose fisherman's clothes and cap, and surmounted by a pale face, in which blazed a pair of steely grey eyes,



surrounded by a shoulder-length crop of raven-black hair.

There was something so wild, so ferocious in the whole aspect of the lad, young as he was, that Tregenna watched him, even as he ran, with singular interest.

Springing down the slope at a great pace, he drew his pistol, and pointed it at the lad, who was watching him intently with a lowering face.

"Surrender!" cried the lieutenant, as he ran.

But, instead of answering, the lad, after waiting, motionless, for him to come within range, suddenly leapt out from among the rest of the struggling men with a bound like an antelope, knocked up the pistol, and, with a savage cry, drew out a cutlass, and made a dash for Tregenna's throat.

## CHAPTER VII.

## AN UGLY CUSTOMER.

LUCKILY for Tregenna, the ground was wet and slippery with the mist. As the lad flew at him, therefore, the force with which he knocked up the pistol in the lieutenant's hand caused him to slip on the slimy ground.

In a moment Tregenna had seized him by the wrist and flung him down.

All this time the lad had not uttered a single word. The rest of the smugglers never ceased shouting and swearing as they fought, using their lungs quite as lustily as they did their arms and legs, and making a deafening din. But the pale boy never uttered a sound, even when he was flung down. He was up again in a second, attacked Tregenna again, and succeeded this time in inflicting a slight wound on his arm. But the lieutenant was ready with



his sword, and, just as the lad aimed a savage thrust at his breast, he parried it and returned it by a cut across the lad's head, which brought the blood flowing in a blinding stream down the side of his face.

At that moment the hand-to-hand fight caught the attention of the rest of the combatants, who were struggling and scuffling in the tangle of gorse and bramble which choked up the dell at the bottom of the slope.

And a second figure, as unlike as possible to the first, rose up out of the *mêlée*, and came to help his young comrade. A giant he was, this loose-limbed, heavy-built sea-dog, with grizzled hair and coarse, sullen red face, who swore loud and deep as he came on, and made for Tregenna with a run, pistol in one hand and cutlass in the other.

"Hey, Jack! Bill! Up with ye, lads, and let the cursed hound have as good as he's given us! 'Tis the lubber that shot poor Tom! Up, lads!"

Up started from the gorse bushes a fresh couple of ruffians, the one a long, lean, lanky fellow in corduroy breeches and an old rug-

coat, that had rather the air of a highwayman than of a son of the sea ; the other a little, pimply-faced rogue in loose jacket and slops, who carried a pipe in his mouth, and a bludgeon in one hand.

This latter uttered a savage oath on perceiving who it was that they were to attack.

"'Tis the chief, the captain. Let's cut his throat and carry him out, and hang him to's own bowsprit, mates!" cried he, in a hoarse rasping voice, as he swung his bludgeon round his head and dashed up the slope after his comrades.

"Ay, that will we, and serve him well for his devotion to's duty," sang out the burly giant who led the attack.

"Have at 'un! Slash at 'un, Robin!" piped out the lean man, in a thin high voice that had a tone of unspeakable savagery in it.

Meanwhile, the lad, blinded by the blood that flowed from the wound in his head, had staggered aside, out of the way of Tregenna and his new assailants.

On they all came, quickly, eagerly, thirsting for revenge on the man who was, they con-

sidered, the leading spirit in the crusade carried on against their nefarious enterprises. But Tregenna did not flinch. He had the advantage of the ground, and his own men were within call.

Planting his feet firmly in the soil, and grasping his sword, to which he chose rather to trust than to his pistol, he shouted to his men in the bushes below, and dealt a swashing blow at the burly giant, whom he guessed to be the redoubtable "Robin Cursemother," of whose exploits he had heard.

Robin parried the blow with his cutlass, while the small man with the bludgeon, whom they addressed as Bill, came to his assistance with a swinging blow, which would have felled the lieutenant to the earth had he not sprung aside just in time to avoid the full force of it.

At the same moment the tall, thin man, whom they called "Jack," aimed at him a blow, with the butt-end of the huge horse-pistol he carried in his belt, which made Tregenna reel.

Luckily for him, his own men had by this time seen him and recognized his peril. His arrival had made the numbers on both sides


more equal ; and the revenue-men, who had been getting the worst of it, took heart from the courageous stand he was making single-handed against the smugglers, and, racing up the slope in the rear of the assailants, diverted their attack.

There ensued a short, sharp hand-to-hand conflict, in which the lieutenant found himself face to face with a fresh opponent in that very "Ben the Blast" whom he had met in such strange circumstances in front of the Frigate at Hurst some days before.

Ben came up with the last batch, panting, roaring like a bull, his face and hands dyed with blood, his teeth set hard, and his eyes blood-shot and aflame.

"The damned lubber that I caught with Ann! I'll settle him! Let me but get at him!" said he, furiously, as he came up.

By this time, however, Tregenna had gathered his men round him, so that they presented a strong front to the smugglers, who, being on lower ground than they, and somewhat overmatched in skill, if not in strength, began to give way.



The lieutenant noted this, and presently gave the signal for a simultaneous rush. Down they came, driving the cursing smugglers like sheep before them over the rough, broken ground of the slope, until Ben the Blast stumbled and fell over a stone, spraining his ankle in the fall.

He got up, turned once upon his foes, with a last vicious blow of his cutlass, which inflicted a nasty cut on the forearm of one of the revenue-men, and yelled out—

“Off, mates, off! Game’s played!”

Then there was a stampede. The smugglers threw away such weapons as they found cumbersome, and took to flight with as much vigour as they had shown in the fight. Making for the dell at the bottom, Ben the Blast, the lithe, pimply-faced Bill, and two others who were evidently seamen, made for their boat, which, still half-full of the cargo they had been in the act of landing when they were disturbed by the revenue-men, was lying snug among the rocks in charge of a lad.


The tall, thin man in the rug-coat, with the rest of his companions, went up the

slope in a north-easterly direction, towards the road.

As they were all far nimbler of foot over the ground, which they knew well, than were their opponents, Lieutenant Tregenna stopped the pursuit of the smugglers when he saw how fast they gained ground, and directed his men to seize such of the contraband goods as were already landed.

When, however, they reached in their turn the bottom of the dell, where they expected to find the booty, they discovered that it had all been safely removed, under cover of the mist, and of the excitement of the fight, and that the boat which had brought it had got out of sight also.

In the mean time Tregenna had been looking about him for the lad who had been the first to attack him, and whom he had himself, in self-defence, somewhat severely wounded. He felt something like admiration of the courage the boy had shown in attacking him single-handed, and was sincerely anxious to learn whether the wound he had been forced to inflict was likely to have lasting consequences.



In answer to the lieutenant's questions, one of the men said that he had seen one man stagger down the slope some minutes before the conclusion of the struggle, in the direction of the shore.

"He looked, sir," said the man, "as if he'd had enough of it. He didn't hardly fare to seem to know whither he was going."

Tregenna went down towards the shore, trying to find some track which he might follow; but the mist and the darkness were creeping on together, and the traces of the conflict being on all sides, in trampled, blood-stained grass and roughened ground, he found nothing to guide his steps.

But when he got down to the beach he was more fortunate. He found footmarks and little red spots on the broken sandstone rocks, and, following these indications, he came round a jutting point of frowning cliff, to a cave, partly hollowed out by the action of the sea, and partly by human hands, the walls of which were green with the slime left by the tides.

Half in and half out of the cave, lying on

the shingle and broken rocks, lay the body of the lad of whom he was in search.

It was with something like tenderness that Tregenna stooped, and, full of dread that his own blow had killed him, raised the lad from the ground, turning him, and looking into his white and livid face, with the half-dried blood making disfiguring patches on one side of it.

For the first moment he thought the boy was dead ; but on further examination he found that the heart was still beating, and at the same moment the lad, who had been in danger of suffocation from the fact that he had fallen face downwards, showed by a movement of the eyelids, and by a quivering of the muscles of the mouth, that he was alive, and recovering.

Tregenna cleansed his face as well as he could from the blood and sand with which it was disfigured. There was no need to loosen his clothes, for his shirt was open at the neck, confined only by a flowing neckerchief, which now hung wet and bedraggled on his breast.

“What cheer, mate!” cried Tregenna, as he supported the lad by the shoulders against his knee, and felt in his own pocket for the



flask he usually carried there, and which was as much a necessity of his adventurous life as the pistol at his belt or the sword at his side.

The lad opened his eyes, stared at him for a moment dully, then with a gleam of returning consciousness. It was at that moment that Tregenna put the flask of *aqua vite* to his lips.

"Drink, lad, drink. 'Twill bring thy senses together. And fear not. We'll not let a brave boy hang, smuggler though he may be! Drink, and fear not. But take this warning, not to meddle with the affairs of lawless folk again."

Still the boy maintained the dead silence which had been such a strangely marked characteristic of him during the fight. He gulped down the spirit put to his lips, and then sat, with his head bent upon his hand, as if still half stupid, either from the blow which had wounded him or from consequent loss of blood.

Tregenna thought there was something of despair in his attitude, and in the wild gaze with which he looked about him, staring first at the gray sea, the edge of which was like a roll of white vapour, and then at the frowning

cliff above him. He seemed to be listening for some voice, some footstep.

"Come," said the lieutenant, in a cheery tone, "don't lose thy spirit, boy; thou showedst enough and to spare but an hour since. Thy comrades are gone, 'tis true, and thou art left alone. But, give but thy word to refrain from such company for the future, and I'll pardon thee, and see thee on thy way, for the sake of the courage thou hast shown, ill as thy cause was."

Still the lad said nothing in answer. But he looked around him with returning intelligence, not at his captor indeed, but at everything else, and particularly at the cliffs, with their jutting points and scrubby growth of reed and flowering weed.

Tregenna followed the direction of his eyes, but saw nothing in particular to attract his attention. But as he took a step away the lad suddenly sprang up, snatching up the lieutenant's pistol, which he had deposited on the ground while tending the wounded boy, and made for a point where the cliff was steepest and apparently most inaccessible.

As soon as he reached it he placed his foot on a ledge of the rock, and, seizing a rope which was evidently well-known to him, began to climb up the face of the cliff with astounding agility, considering his recent dazed condition.

Tregenna followed quickly. But the lad, who was by this time a good way up, drew up the end of the rope after him, and fastened it into a knot, so that it was far out of his pursuer's reach. To attempt to climb the cliff without it was impossible ; and Tregenna could only stand and shake his fist at the lad in impotent rage at the daring with which he had been again outwitted.

But the lad's impudence and audacity did not stop there. The moment he reached the summit of the cliff, he dislodged a loose mass of earth and sandstone which was lying loose in one of the crevices at the edge, and, with a deft kick, hurled it down upon his generous enemy below.

Tregenna stepped back hastily, receiving thus only some fragments of dust and earth upon his head, instead of the heavy mass which had been intended for him.

And he swore to himself, as he turned away and made for his own boat, that he would never again be so soft-hearted as to spare one of these ruffians, who, even in early youth, were dead to every generous human feeling.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### REDE HALL.

As Tregenna went quickly along the shore, he was not too well pleased to find that one of his own men had been a witness, at a little distance, of his discomfiture at the lad's hands.

The man indeed had a grin on his face when the lieutenant first caught sight of him, which changed to a look of supreme gravity when he caught his captain's eye. He pulled his forelock, and said the boat was ready.

"I suppose you don't know who that fellow is that's got away over the cliff?" said he, sharply.

"Oh, ay, sir, I know who he be well enough," answered the man, promptly. "He be Jem Bax, by what I've heard tell, I'm pretty sure."

"Jem Bax! That bit of a lad!"

"Ay, sir. And, by what I've heard tell, he be about the worst of the whole lot of 'em, old or young!"

This certainly tallied with the experience Tregenna had had of the young ruffian, so he swallowed his annoyance as well as he could, and, turning again to the man, said shortly—

"And it's the old story, of course? Nobody knows anything about him, or where he lives, or anything that could help to put us on his track?"

The man appeared to glance about him cautiously, as if afraid that his reply might be overheard by some unseen person. Then he answered, in a low voice—

"Well, sir, they do say he's to be heard of somewheres about Rede Hall."

"Rede Hall?" echoed the lieutenant with interest.

For this was, he knew, the home of the artful Ann Price, of whose wiles he retained so vivid a remembrance.

"Ay, sir."

And then it crossed Tregenna's mind that this rascally lad must be some relation of Ann's,

a younger brother, perhaps; for, looking back to his impression of the boy's pale, set face, he seemed now to be able to trace a resemblance between his features and those of Ann, different as was the expression of the calm, homely woman from that of the fierce lad.

It was clear, then, that Rede Hall must now be visited, and that in the first place a warrant must be obtained for the apprehension of such of the smugglers as he could identify; for Jem Bax, Ben the Blast, Robin, nicknamed "Curse-mother," Bill, nicknamed "Plunder," and for one other, whom he could only describe as "Jack," as there was, even among the cutter's crew, a certain strange reluctance to give him any further name.

When Tregenna called at Hurst Court to obtain the warrants, in company with the brigadier, on the following morning, he found himself in the midst of a very lively scene. The squire had given a breakfast to the members of the hunt, and the guests were trooping out of the house, and mounting their horses on the lawn in front.

The scarlet coats of the men gave a pretty

touch of bright colour to the scene ; and the presence of ladies, in their silken skirts and velvet hoods, added brilliancy to the gathering. Behind the scattered groups on the grass, the white house and the red-brown trees on either side of it formed a picturesque background, throwing up the gay colours of the costumes in vivid relief.

One figure, and one only, attracted Tregenna's attention the moment he entered the gates. This was Joan Langney, who, in her plain Sunday gown of russet tabby, with a full black hood, looked, he thought, a very queen of beauty among the more smartly dressed wives and daughters of the country squires.

He let the brigadier pass on alone up to the place where Squire Waldron was standing, and, dismounting from his horse, lingered a moment to pay his respects to Mistress Joan. He had always the excuse to himself that she might be able to afford him some useful information.

"Your servant, Miss Joan. 'Tis not necessary to ask if you are well this morning."

"Your servant, Mr. Tregenna. I am quite well, I thank you," replied Joan, with a curtsy.



It seemed to him there was in her brown eyes, as she looked quickly up and down again, a malicious suggestion that she had heard all about his unlucky encounter with the smugglers the day before.

"You will bear me no good will to-day, Miss Joan, since I come to obtain a warrant against your friends the free-traders," said he, perceiving that her glance wandered at once in the direction of the brigadier.

"I guessed as much, sir. Indeed, the doings yesterday put the village in an uproar. They say you had a brush with some of the boldest spirits about here?"

"I' faith, 'tis true, madam. I made acquaintance with Jem Bax, in particular, and I do e'en propose that, in return, he shall make acquaintance with the inside of a gaol."

At his mention of the name, Joan suddenly smiled, as if with an irresistible impulse to great amusement. She pursed up her lips again in a moment, but Tregenna, much nettled, said dryly—

"Doubtless, Miss Joan, you have some kindness for that young knave also, though he

played me the scurviest trick I have ever known."

And with that he proceeded to give her an account of his own compassion upon the lad, and of Jem's ungrateful return.

There was some satisfaction, however, in seeing how Joan took this recital. Her face clouded as she listened; and when he ended, there were tears in her eyes.

"'Twas infamous, sir, shameful, to treat you so, after what you had done," cried she, with a heightened colour in her cheeks and the sparkle of indignation in her eyes. "And if they treat you like that again, I'll be a turncoat myself, and do my best to help you against —Jem."

"You speak," said Tregenna, with curiosity, "as if that bit of a lad were the ringleader of the gang."

Again Joan shot at him a glance in which there was some amusement. But she answered demurely—

"He is old for his years, sir, I believe."

"Well, Miss Joan, I shall think my experience of yesterday worth the risk if it but

bring you to our side, the side of law and of justice."

By this time he saw that the brigadier had got the ear of the squire, and that he had turned to see why his companion had deserted him. Tregenna, therefore, with a low bow to Joan, remounted and rode across the grass to join him.

Squire Waldron, though by no means in the best of humours at this interruption to the serious business of fox-hunting, made out the warrants as desired by Tregenna and General Hambledon; but he took care to twit them with their ill success against the smugglers, and with their failure to catch "Gardener Tom."

Tregenna took these reproaches modestly, but the brigadier blustered, and said that he was ready to be shot if he did not bring one or more of the ringleaders among the smugglers back to Rye with him that afternoon.

"And, gads my life, sir," he went on with emphasis which made him purple in the face; "but I'll warrant me I'll have it out with Mistress Ann, and make her give up this Jem Bax, if she's harbouring him."

The squire smiled a little, just as Joan had done at the mention of Jem's name. And Tregenna was confirmed in his belief that the young ruffian was a relation of Ann's, and that she would put every possible obstacle in the way of his being given up.

When General Hambledon and Tregenna came out of the house, where they had been shut up with the squire during the formal making out of the warrants, the lieutenant looked about in vain for Joan. Not only had she herself disappeared ; but Parson Langney, who had been prominent, with his jolly face and jolly voice, among the red-coated groups on the lawn, trotting about on his nag, and as eager for the sport as anybody there, had taken his departure also.

Tregenna pondered on this fact, which was the more strange, since not one other of the assembled guests was missing. But it was not until he and the general, and the score of mounted troopers who accompanied them, had traversed the village, forded the river, ridden the two miles to Rede Hall, and come in sight of that ancient dwelling, that the mystery was solved.

From the gates of the farmhouse, just as the soldiers came into view, there issued Parson Langney on his nag, with his daughter Joan mounted on a pillion behind him.

The brigadier saw no significance in this; the parson was doing his rounds, that was all. But to Tregenna the incident bore a very different meaning. He jumped to the conclusion that Joan had set off with her father to warn the inhabitants of Rede Hall of the visit which was in store for them; and, on the instant, he decided that he and the brigadier would be as unsuccessful on this occasion as they had been hitherto.

In the mean time, General Hambledon had caught sight of a lonely inn a little way off the road, and directed his way thither, with the very proper excuse that in these places one could hear all the gossip and pick up valuable information.

Tregenna ventured to make two suggestions—the one was that the sooner they got to the farmhouse the more likely they were to effect a capture; the other, that nobody about was likely to give information to them, since their

uniforms betrayed the sort of errand on which they had come.

Of course he was overruled by the general ; and, a few minutes later, they found themselves at the bar of the rickety little timber erection, with its battered sign creaking from a tree on the opposite side of the road.

"'Tis a vastly pretty view you have from hence," remarked the brigadier, in the course of making himself agreeable to the knot of drovers, labourers, and nondescript wanderers who stood within the inn doors, watching the soldiers.

The landlord was the only person bold enough to answer the smart soldier—

"Ay, sir ; 'tis, as you say, a pretty view."

"What call you that building yonder ? Is't a gentleman's seat, or what ?"

"Nay, sir, 'tis no gentleman's seat now ; though methinks I've heard 'twas a considerable place once on a time. 'Tis but a farmhouse that they call Rede Hall."

"Rede Hall—eh ? And what sort of folk are they that live there now ?"

"'Tis kept by an old farmer, sir, that lives

there with his wife, his son, and his daughter. They be quiet folks, sir, and I know nowt else about 'em," said the landlord, who knew perfectly well on what business the brigadier had come, as he remembered hearing of a similar expedition which had come that way not many days before.

"Quiet! Ay, but they be main queer folks," piped out an old man, who was enjoying his tankard of ale at the bar. "The place has had a mighty odd name these long years past; and they do say, sir, 'tis haunted. There was a wicked lord lived there in the orld toime, so they say, and he killed his wife by flaying her to death in what was once the chapel, and that now they call the Grey Barn."

"Hey, man, them's but idle tales," said the landlord, quickly.

"Ah doan't know that, Ah doan't know that," chimed in another man, taking up the running now that the first awe of the grand soldier had worn off. "Ah've heeard the tale, too, and how they say he can't rest in's grave, but works with his flail in the Grey Barn o' nights e'en now. And for sure Ah've heeard myself most

fearsome noises, and seen a blue light a-burning like to none other I ever see afore, as Ah've crossed the bridge below there yonder o' nights, when Ah've been late home wi' my waggon."

"Ay, and Farmer Price, hisself, he've seen—summat. He's told as much hisself," said another man. "'Tis a place I'd not care to sleep in while there was a hedge to lie under."

"Tales; naught but old wives' tales!" said the landlord, imperturbably. "The old lady would never ha' lived all these years in the place if so be there was aught to be afeared on under yon honest roof."

The general opinion, however, seemed to be rather with the old man who had first spoken than with the landlord on this matter. And Tregenna felt more than ever convinced, as they came away from the inn and crossed the stream by the little bridge that led to the farmhouse, that this was the wasps' nest to be smoked out.

It was an ancient and picturesque pile of building, this Rede Hall, standing on the slope of a hill, and presenting to the view of the



visitors a long south side of red brick, in the Tudor style, in a state of indifferent repair, with a somewhat unkempt growth of ivy and other creepers hanging about it and almost choking a small door, of later date than the building, which was now the state entrance to the house.

The grass-grown state of the narrow garden-path which led to this door betrayed the fact that visits of state to the occupants of Rede Hall were a great rarity.

Beyond the main building, on the west side, was the Grey Barn, easily to be distinguished both by its colour and by the ecclesiastical character of the blocked-up windows, in some of which the tracery was still almost perfect. The roof, however, was now of thatch, well-grown with moss and grass, lichen and tufts of wall-flower; and the swallows built their nests under the eaves.

On this side of the house was the farmyard, surrounded by a high sandstone wall; and the space between the big barn and the dwelling was filled up by outbuildings, most of which were in a ruinous condition.

It was when they rode up to the common entrance of the farmhouse, which was on the east side of the house, that the visitors came to the most interesting and ancient part of the building. All this portion was built of sandstone, mellow with age and weather. And a huge, massive porch, with a small lodge on one side and a room above, formed a fitting entrance to what was now the farmhouse kitchen, but which had been, in old times, the hall of the mansion.

The door was open ; and when the brigadier and his young companion had dismounted from their horses and stood inside the porch, they had full opportunity to note the details of one of the most picturesque scenes it was possible to find, while the great bell clanged, and an old woman came slowly forward to receive them.

Anything more peaceful, more homely, more utterly irreconcilable with the notion of lawlessness and nefarious deeds than the room and its occupants presented it was impossible to imagine.

At one end of the vast apartment, which was

some forty feet long, and broad and lofty in proportion, a fire was built up on the iron dogs in the great open fireplace; and an iron pot, hanging from a crane in the chimney, gave forth a savoury smell.

Close by the fire, crouching in the warmest corner of the oak settle, with her back to the light, sat a woman who never turned at the visitors' approach. On the opposite side of the hearth, but well in the corner of the room, another woman, larged-boned and gaunt, with grey hair half-hidden by a large mob-cap, sat busy with her spinning-wheel. On his knees before the fire, with a mongrel dog on each side of him, was a withered and bent old man.

These, and the old woman who came to the door to speak with the strangers, were all the occupants of the huge apartment.

Some other details Tregenna took in, such as the extreme cleanliness of the uneven red-tiled floor, of the long deal table at the north end of the room, of the yellow-washed, rough walls. He noted the brown-and-red earthenware vessels on the tall oak dresser, the hams

and bunches of herbs dangling from dark beams above.

The next moment he was saluting the old dame, in answer to her respectful curtsey.

A little, clean, bright-eyed woman she was, spotless as to cap and apron, and as active as if the stick she carried were for ornament rather than use. Recognizing the brigadier with a smile, she dropped a curtsey to him, and asked his pleasure.

"Faith, dame, 'tis no pleasure brings us here, but rather the reverse; since I have reason to think you played me false t'other day, and that you know more about those rascals the smugglers than you and Mistress Ann would have had me suppose!"

"Smugglers! Nay, sir, I know nought of them! My good man and I have always kept ourselves from such folks, and brought up our childer in the same way. And if you please, sir, you can search where you like, if that be your purpose, but you shall find no such villains here."

In spite of all he had heard, of all he knew, Tregenna was almost inclined to believe her;

for what could be more open, more honest, than this manner of receiving them, with the door flung wide and this frank invitation to enter where they would? The brigadier's manner, however, was rather short with her.

"Let us hope it may prove as you say," said he, as he beckoned his troopers to enter. "We have a warrant for certain of these fellows, ma'am, and we intend to search the place. But first I would speak with your daughter, Mistress Ann."

"Ah, sir, you'll be sorry to see her so bad as she is; for she's been nigh out of her wits with the toothache these two days and nights. But she'll speak with you, sir, I doubt not." And the old woman led the way the whole length of the room, and pausing in front of the settle, cried, in a loud voice, "Ann, dost hear? 'Tis the soldier-gentleman that was so polite when he came hither last Friday se'nnight! Dost mind? Him that was so civil to thee, for all he came to look for Gardener Tom, and could not find him." The old woman turned again to the brigadier, who was close behind, and added, with some irritation: "I

know not, sir, why 'tis always to us you come in your search for these evil-doers!"

"We come, dame, where we're most like to find them!" retorted the brigadier dryly, as he came clanking up the tiled floor, and planted himself before the suffering Ann. "And now, mistress, I'd be glad to have an explanation why you failed to come to Rye to see me, as you gave me your word, to put me on the trail of the smugglers."

Ann, whose face was bound up in a handkerchief, with a huge flannel bag against the right cheek, turned to him impatiently.

"Sir, I have been in no fit state for visiting, as you may judge by the size my face is swollen. I caught cold last market-day, and I have not left the house since. Pray, sir, make your search of the place, if that is your good pleasure, and leave me alone."

"As you please, Mistress Ann. And I shall know what to do next if we fail to find the men," replied the brigadier angrily, as he turned on his spurred heel, and clanked down the great room again.

Ann turned to Tregenna, who had followed

modestly in the brigadier's steps. "And pray, sir, what may you want here? Have you a warrant too?"

"Nay, Mistress Ann, I would fain have put some questions to you had you been in better health to answer them. As it is, I cannot trouble you now; I will come hither again at some more convenient season."

"Nay, sir, there's no time like the present," retorted Ann in a tone of considerable irritation; "ask what questions you please."

"Well, then, I have heard talk that you have a barn that's haunted, and I would be glad to know whether 'tis by spirits or by men."

"Sure, the best way to answer that would be to see for yourself, sir," retorted Ann, sharply.

"Nay, there's a time for such apparitions, and that's not noonday," said Tregenna.

"Come at what time you please, sir, and satisfy yourself by ear and eye."

"You mean that?"

"Faith, sir, I do."

And she turned her back upon him again, and crouched once more over the fire, swaying

backwards and forwards, with her hand to her swollen face.


Tregenna saw that she was in pain, and made allowance for her irritation. He retreated to the other end of the long apartment, and awaited the return of the soldiers, who were now engaged in making an exhaustive search of the premises.

Not much to his surprise, they presently returned to the front of the porch, while the brigadier re-entered the room, hot, flushed, and in a very bad temper.

They had hunted in every corner of the house, of the outbuildings, of the barns, but not a man was to be found.

They took a very cold leave of the old farmer's wife, and of the farmer himself, who came respectfully to the door to see them off. He was about seventy years of age, and almost childish, and he obeyed mechanically his wife's instructions to salute the visitors.

When the party had ridden off, before the eyes of the old couple, and the last of the troopers' horses had crossed the bridge over the stream at the bottom of the hill, Ann





looked across, with a laugh, to the woman at the spinning-wheel.

"'Twas lucky they were but men, Jack," said she, "or they'd have found out long since that, while thy wheel went round, there was nothing spun!"

And the woman at the spinning-wheel rose to a full height of some six feet, took off the cap and the grey woman's wig, and disclosed to view the sallow, thin face and mouse-coloured hair of "Long Jack," the smuggler.


## CHAPTER IX.

## TRAITRESS OR FRIEND?

THE October sunshine was bright ; there was a pleasant, bracing breeze coming from the sea ; the brown trees were at their prettiest, as they shed their showers of dead leaves at the lightest touch of the wind : yet the brigadier and Lieutenant Tregenna, as they rode side by side away from Rede Hall, noted none of these things : for to them the sky was lowering, and the wind whistled of failure and disappointment.

"Did you search the great barn?" asked Tregenna, interrupting a string of his companion's curses upon things in general and women in particular.

"Ay, every corner of it, and poked into every cranny," answered General Hambledon, morosely. "There was naught in the whole



place, but a couple of rusty ploughshares, a few sacks full of grain, and some lumber that we turned inside out in search of contraband goods. But no, sir, not so much as a keg of *aqua vitæ*, or a quid of tobacco was there in any corner."

"They're cunning folk," said Tregenna, rather dismally. "I have small faith in Mistress Ann's toothache, for one thing."

"Nay, why should she fain?" said the brigadier, quickly. "The lass looked vastly ill, to my thinking. Had she been herself, I warrant we should have had some sport, at least; for I've found her ready with her tongue, and as full of jests as she is of tricks."

"You think now that she's a confederate of the smugglers?"

"Damme, it seems like it. Wherever one asks about these cattle, one hears talk of this Rede Hall, as if 'twere their head-quarters. The difficulty is to take the beggars unawares. They must have been prepared this morning. Odds life!" The general started violently as he uttered these words, evidently struck by a new idea. "The parson! He was at the

squire's this morning, when we went to get the warrants! It's as like as not he's friendly to the gang, like all the rest of them in these parts. Mayhap he guessed our errand, and was away to put them on their guard before we left the house! Eh, sir? What do you think about it?"

Tregenna was frowning gloomily. He was honest; biting his lips, he made confession of his share in the mystery.

"Ay, truly I fear so, and that I had a hand in bringing it about," he admitted, somewhat shamefacedly. "I had a few words to say to Mistress Joan, little thinking——"

The general interrupted him, breaking out into a laugh and an oath at the same time.

"Ay, you lads, there's no keeping you away from the petticoats!" he said mockingly. "Had you but held your tongue, and kept your mind on your duty instead of blinking into the eyes of a handsome lass, we might have surprised the villains, and not have come back with our tails between our legs, like the fools we look now!"

"Sir," retorted Tregenna, not angrily, but

still with spirit, "I have but taken a leaf out of your own book. As you were tricked by Mistress Ann Price, so have I been befooled by Mistress Joan Langney. So that neither of us can in fairness reproach the other!"

For a few moments the brigadier seemed inclined to resent the view taken of the case by the younger man. After a little reflection, however, and the finding of some relief in a flow of his favourite language, he allowed himself to laugh shortly.

"Well," grumbled he at last, "we can at least ease our minds by going straight to the parson's house, and bestowing upon him our opinion of his conduct, and some advice as to the future. And thank the Lord he's lost his run with the hounds to-day!"

Lieutenant Tregenna was not likely to object to any proposal which promised to bring him within speaking distance of Mistress Joan; so they set their horses at a smart trot, and were back in the village without much loss of time.

When they got to the Parsonage, it was the master himself who answered their summons,

with, they fancied, a rather guilty look on his face.

"Can we speak a word with you, sir?" said the brigadier, in a short, dry tone. "You know whence we come, as I think."

"Ay, come in, come in. You are both heartily welcome," said the vicar, pushing his wig to one side of his head, as his custom was when he was troubled or perplexed. "You shall taste of my daughter's currant wine, and drink the health of his Majesty."

"'Twould be more to the purpose, sir, with all thanks to you for your hospitality," replied the brigadier, "if you would assist his Majesty's troops in the execution of their duty, instead of doing what you can to impede them."

"How say you, sir? What mean you?" retorted the parson sturdily, as he turned upon them, apparently glad to find that things had so quickly come to a crisis.

He had led his visitors into the little dining-parlour, which was one-half of the lower part of what had once been a fine hall. The roof was low, and the beams were roughly white-washed like the rest of the ceiling. A small

window, with latticed panes, was set in the thickness of the wall on the front side of the house. Opposite the door was the old wide hearth, the upper part filled with curiously carved woodwork, and a comfortable wooden armchair in the corner on each side. On the high shelf above were a couple of brass candlesticks, each containing a tallow candle, in that time of rushlights quite a luxurious extravagance. On the oak dining-table in the middle of the room were the parson's writing materials, his bunch of quills, round jar of ink, half a dozen rough sheets of paper, and a sand-box. And beside them was his pipe, just laid down.

Two strips of carpet laid on the stone floor; red window curtains; half a dozen solid oak chairs with tapestry seats, and a couple of ancient oak chests, completed the furniture of the room, which yet had a comfortable and homely aspect.

"What mean you by saying I impede his Majesty's troops in the execution of their duty?" repeated Parson Langney, standing in all the pugnacious dignity of the church militant,

with his back to the fire, and his wig more on one side than ever.

"You was in a mighty hurry, sir, this morning, to get to Rede Hall before we could reach it with the warrants we hold for the arrest of certain plunderers of his Majesty's revenue," blurted out the brigadier, planting one hand on his hip, and thumping the table with the other as he spoke.

Parson Langney was no actor ; the expression which clouded his jolly face betrayed him.

"Sir, I was at Rede Hall this morning, I admit," said he, looking defiantly at the officer. "But as for what I did there, you have no right to put such an interpretation as you do upon my visit."

"Do you deny, sir, that you mentioned we were on our way thither?" roared the brigadier.

"I deny, sir, that you have any right to put such questions to me," retorted the parson quite as loudly.

The gentlemen were both much heated ; and it began to look, as they advanced their excited faces nearer and nearer over the table, till the tails of their bob-wigs stuck up quivering in



the air, as if from mere words they would ere long come to blows.

When suddenly there appeared, in the doorway of the narrow little entrance to the kitchen which filled the corner beyond the fireplace, a peacemaker in the shape of handsome Joan.

She had evidently been engaged in some culinary occupation, for there were traces of flour still to be seen on her round arms, under the long black mittens which she had hastily pulled on. She had exchanged the smart tabby gown of the morning for a homelier dress, over which her long white apron hung. Her pretty brown hair, without any cap, was rolled high above her white brow. Her face was pale and anxious, as she came quickly in and thrust one hand through her father's arm.

"Let me answer him, father," said she in a low voice.

The general drew himself up. "Well, madam, and what have you to say?" said he, unconsciously softening his tone, as no man could help doing when addressing a creature so fair.

"It was I, sir, who begged my father to

give up his hunting and to come to Rede Hall with me ; and if you have any fault to find with that action, 'tis I should bear the blame of it."

"And pray, mistress, what need had you to go to the farm in such a monstrous hurry?"

"That, sir, frankly I would rather not tell."

"Ho, ho, 'tis told then! 'Twas without doubt to put these rascals on their guard, and to enable them to get away ere we came up!"


Joan made no answer.

"You can't deny it, madam! Remember, we have already had proof of your sympathy with the ruffians, in that you let Gardener Tom escape from your house when you knew we were after him!"

"Sir, there was a higher duty before us then, than that of aiding in the capture of a criminal. We would have done the same for you, had you been staying under our roof, ay, had you been accused of murder," said the girl, with spirit.

"Well said, my lass," cried her father.

But the brigadier's chivalry was not proof against the provocation he was receiving from this valiant and outspoken young woman. He gave her one angry look, gulped down the



words he dared not utter to her, and, turning hastily back to the parson, said shortly—

“This, sir, is no affair to discuss with ladies. 'Tis with you I would have my talk out, and 'tis your explanation I wish to hear. The lady must pardon me, but this is an affair which touches my honour and my fame as a commander.”

“Go, my dear, go back to your work,” said her father, patting her hand affectionately, and giving her a nod of command. “Leave these gentlemen and me to settle this together.”

Though with manifest reluctance, Joan obeyed, withdrawing her arm from her father's with one tender glance in his face, and curtsying low to the visitors, with her eyes on the ground, ere retiring.

No sooner was she gone back to the kitchen, than the two combatants began again the old discussion, never getting much further with it—the one reproaching, accusing, the other evading, excusing. But they seemed perhaps a little calmer since that pleasant irruption of the sweet sex, even when the gentle presence was withdrawn

So that it presently seemed good to Lieutenant Tregenna to leave them to fight the matter out together, while he made the balance of parties even by beating a retreat to that end of the room where the lady had disappeared. The kitchen door was ajar, and, while the two elderly gentlemen were still banging the table and growing purple in the face, he took the liberty of peeping through the chink. The yellow-washed walls looked bright in the sunlight; the deal table, scrubbed beautifully white, was quite a picturesque object with the great red earthenware dish lying upon it. The jugs on the walls, the metal utensils on the dresser, made a charming picture. So did the tabby cat, curled up in one corner; so, above all, did that particularly neat figure in the grey homespun frock, with the graceful arms and the clever hands, and with that delicious profile above it all.

"I tell you, sir, you are no better than a traitor to the king if you do not help his officers."

"I tell you, sir, you don't know what you are talking about!"

Thus the gentlemen jangled on; but their bickering had become an unimportant incident to Tregenna.

He made rather a nice picture himself in his smart uniform, with his well-powdered wig surmounting a handsome, clean-cut face, his grey hawks' eyes, now filled with the light of the young and ardent, his mouth softened by the suspicion of a smile. He held his sword with one hand, that its clanking should not startle her; and his smart three-cornered hat was cocked jauntily under his arm.

Suddenly she turned; and by this time he was half inside the kitchen door. Joan uttered a little cry; and, as if taking it for an invitation, Tregenna hopped right in and came up to her.

"Sir," said she, "what business have you with me?"

But she was not angry; she crossed her hands, one of which held a rolling-pin, demurely in front of her, and looked down in a stately fashion, not at all disturbed at being discovered in the act of making a pudding, for those were domestic days.

"Much the same business, Miss Joan, that

the brigadier has with your father," said Tregenna. "There is no pretence, as you know, betwixt you and me. We are foes avowed. I ask you no questions about your visit to the farm this morning, because I *know* what took you thither. Neither will you need to ask why I am going again to Rede Hall, to inquire into this mystery concerning the Grey Barn."

"You are going again?" said Joan, with interest, in which he thought he detected fear also.

"Yes. And I make no secret of saying I am not going to be fooled by the innocent appearance of the place. I am going again and again, until I have cleared them all out, like wasps out of a hole. Mistress Ann Price and her confederates must find a fresh field for their practices: I swear they shall not continue to carry them on in that part of the coast that is under my vigilance."

"And you do not fear to tell me this, believing, as you do, that I am in league with them myself? "

"'Tis for that reason I tell you, that you may warn them they must go."

"Why did you not tell Mistress Ann herself?" asked Joan, with strange quietness. "If you think, as you say, she is concerned with the gang?"

"I will tell her when I meet her next," said Tregenna, promptly. "She has challenged me to go some night and find out for myself the truth of the tales the folk tell about the haunted barn. She——"

But Joan interrupted him, with a sudden look of intense anxiety—

"She challenged you to go at night? To the great barn?"

"Ay, that she did. And I accepted her invitation."

"But you will not go! You must not! 'Twould not be safe——"

Joan uttered the words with great earnestness; but stopped, blushing, when she had got so far. Tregenna took up her words—

"Not safe! How mean you? Surely my safety is the last thing you would concern yourself with. 'Tis for the safety of these smuggling folk alone that you care."

Joan looked down, and said nothing. But

it was plain by the heaving of her breast and by her laboured breathing, that she was much agitated.

"Is it not so, Miss Joan?"

"Nay, Mr. Tregenna, 'tis not so. I would not have you come to harm. If you pursue those whom I have reason to hold in more esteem than you do, I know that 'tis but your duty you are doing."

"And 'tis in the performance of my duty that I must visit Rede Hall again."

"And I tell you again that you must not. Without saying aught against the people that live there, I know there are others that frequent that neighbourhood that would not scruple to set upon you, perhaps to kill you, for what you have done to their friends and confederates. No, Mr. Tregenna, if you go, go with your men, or with the general, but go not alone."

"I thank you for your warning. But 'tis alone I must go. Surely you do not credit your friend Mistress Ann with any intention of luring me into a danger she must know of."

But to his surprise, Joan's face clearly betrayed that she did believe Ann Price capable



of such a proceeding. At least, this was what he read in her perturbed expression.

"Ann is a strange creature," said she dubiously. "She is a most loyal *friend*, but——"

The pause which ensued was expressive.

"But a dangerous enemy. Is that what you would say?"

"Maybe," said Joan, curtly.

"Well, I must risk what she can do——"

"Even though you know not how much that may be?"

"Even then."

There was another pause.

"When do you purpose going?" asked Joan, suddenly.

"Ah, that I may not tell you."

"You trust me not, sir? You think I would betray you into the hands of them that would do you harm?"

"Nay, I do not say that. I do not think that. But, as you keep your own counsel where these smugglers are concerned, so do I think it best to keep mine own."

Joan bowed her head proudly, as if in assent.

But she was not at her ease ; she glanced at him quickly, and he saw that there were tears in her dark eyes, whether of mortification, of sympathy, or of some other feeling, he could not tell.


As they stood silent, he looking at her, and she turning towards the ivy-hung window, the voice of the vicar startled them both, as he called—

“Joan, where art thou, child?”

“Here, father,” cried she, as, with a rather startled, shamefaced look at Tregenna, she ran into the dining-parlour, followed more slowly by her companion.

Neither of the young people had noticed, so much interested had they been in their own conversation, that the voices of the two gentlemen had gradually sunk to more friendly tones. But both were glad to see, on re-entering the room where they had left the disputants, that the battle of tongues was over, and that the general was sitting by the fireside in an attitude indicative of a more friendly mood.

And Joan was bidden to bring the currant wine, in which both the brigadier and Tregenna



pledged their host right heartily, whatever suspicions they might have as to the existence of a stronger liquor in the cellar.

They all spent a pleasant ten minutes over the wine and discreet small talk, and then the visitors took their leave.

As the brigadier shook hands with his host, Joan found an opportunity to exchange a few more words with the younger guest.

"Will you not take one last word of warning, sir, and refrain from visiting Rede Hall alone?"

"I fear I can give you no such promise, though I thank you for your kindness."

"Which, nevertheless, you trust not. Farewell then, sir; for if you keep to your intention, I shall never see you again alive."

## CHAPTER X.

## THE MYSTERY OF THE GREY BARN.

It was not without a chilly feeling down the marrow that Lieutenant Tregenna heard these last words, which Joan uttered quickly indeed, but with the most impressive earnestness, ere she turned her back upon the departing visitors and hastily re-entered the house.

Far from causing him to waver in his determination to get at the bottom of the mystery of Rede Hall and its occupants, Joan's words did but make him more impatient for the adventure. He was ashamed of himself for certain doubts which would arise in his mind as to her good faith in giving him this warning. He hated the thought of believing her treacherous; but, at the same time, it was impossible to deny that her interest in the people he was pursuing was intensely strong,

so that it was pardonable to doubt whether her professed solicitude on his account was genuine.

And yet he hesitated to admit the possibility of her playing him false. After all, he could make allowance for her feelings towards these people, among whom she had spent her childhood, and from whom she had received kindness from her earliest years. Was there not something noble, rather than perverse, in her honest espousal of their cause, even in her defiance of law and order in the persons of himself and the soldiers?

Tregenna, if the truth must be told, thought quite as much about Joan as he did about the important affairs in which he was engaged. He decided to pay his visit to Rede Hall on the night of the following day. It was from no foolhardiness that he resolved to venture alone on this expedition; it was from the certainty he felt that a sharp look-out would be kept, and that any attempt to bring a force against the place would be met by the same ignominious result as the visit of the morning.

The following evening proved an admirable

one for his purpose. It was dark ; it was wet ; it was gloomy. After leaving orders that a sharp look-out was to be kept for the smugglers, to whom such a night was as propitious as it was to his own purpose, Tregenna went ashore, and started alone and on foot across the cliffs for Rede Hall.

He had taken care to procure a loose, rough countryman's coat, waistcoat, and breeches, which disguised him very effectually, and which had the further advantage of enabling him to conceal a brace of pistols and a cutlass, with which he thought it prudent to arm himself. A brown George wig and an enormous three-cornered hat, in a high state of shabbiness, completed his attire. And there was nothing but the springy, elastic walk of youth about him to betray that he was not some decent inn-keeper or small farmer on a late trudge along the lanes.

He took a short cut, and was in sight of the hall in less than an hour.

He had kept a careful watch to see that he was not observed or followed ; and he was quite sure, when he first saw the faint lights

## MYSTERY OF THE GREY BARN. 147

of the farmhouse through the drizzling rain, that so far he had passed unsuspected and undetected by such wayfarers as he had met on the road.

Instead of going straight up to the hall, he walked along at the bottom of the hill, by the side of the stream, keeping his eyes upon the building. And it was with a strange excitement that he heard, when he had come well in sight of the grey barn, a dull sound, repeated at intervals, like the noise of a descending flail.

At the same time he became aware of a faint and flickering light, which was just visible through certain slits and gaps in the boarding with which the original chapel windows of the barn had been filled up.

There was not a living creature in sight, though the slight noises made by the animals in the farmyard came to Tregenna's ears as he went slowly and cautiously up the slope towards the barn.

The wall was high, but easy to climb ; he crossed the straw of the yard quickly and without noise, while the muffled sounds from inside

the barn grew louder and more distinct. It was not until he was close under the south wall of the barn that a hoarse murmur of men's voices reached his ears, deadened, muffled, scarcely audible above the steady sound of blows.

He looked about for some means of getting up to the level of the slits in the boarding of the windows, by which the barn now received ventilation and light. Only a sailor would have been able to avail himself of such means as he found. A bit of straggling creeper, that gave way under the touch of the foot; part of a wooden drain-pipe rotten and broken; the crevices between the rough stones: such were the footholds by which he was able to scramble up to the old east window; and once at this level, he climbed by the help of the stone tracery to the rose heading at the top, where there was a gap in the boarding large enough for him to see the interior of the barn from end to end.

It was a weird sight that met his astonished eyes. By the flaring light of some half-dozen smoking torches, which threw a fantastic glare



upon the stone walls, upon the still perfect arcade at the base, upon fragments of arch and pillar, corbel and broken groin, a dozen men were at work upon the building of a boat some thirty feet long, which lay, like some huge sprawling creature, on the floor below.

Tregenna watched with fascinated eyes. He had heard of the secret ship-building yards, where the smuggling craft were manufactured, and whence they were drawn down to the sea on the farm waggons in the darkest hours of the night; but no suspicion of the grey barn in connection with such doings had ever entered his head; and it was clear that even the country folk had been kept out of the secret.

Clash! clash! upon his ears, in his place of vantage, came the sound of the driving in of the iron bolts. He saw the brawny bare arms of the men go up above their heads, hammer in hand, to come down with a thud upon the ship's groaning sides. He saw the great skeleton monster shiver under the blows; heard the hoarse laugh, the muttered oaths, which the men, cautious even at their toil, exchanged as they worked. And presently,

as he got used to the din, to the waving, smoking lights, to the excitement of his strange position, he began to distinguish the words they uttered, and presently to discover that he himself was one of the subjects of their conversation.

"Curse me if I think the boat'll ever swim, with all these eyes afore and behind us what we've got now!" cried one voice, which Tregenna knew that he had heard before.

It was a difficult matter to recognize faces and figures so much foreshortened as they were from the lofty perch he occupied: but he presently perceived that the speaker was the little mean-looking man with the pimply face, who had taken part in the last fray, and who was known as "Bill Plunder."

"Ods rabbit it! What matters the eyes?" sang out the burly giant, Robin Cursemother, as he dealt a sounding blow on the head of the bolt he was driving in. "There's but one pair to signify, and we mean to close them, don't we, lads, so as they shan't see naught to hurt no more!"

Then up spoke a third man, who was seated



## MYSTERY OF THE GREY BARN. 151

on a barrel in a corner, with a pipe between his lips, and holding a torch in one hand. He limped when he moved, and Tregenna guessed that this was the "Gardener Tom" whom he had himself wounded, and whom the parson and his daughter had sheltered under their roof. He was a young fellow of not more than five or six and twenty, well made and handsome, with an open, honest face and manly voice : a man too good for a smuggler, Tregenna decided.

"Nay, the young officer does but his duty in running us down. And I don't want to see no harm come to him, though 'twas he shot me through the leg. So we can but keep clear of him, 'tis all I want. Miss Joan 'ud be main sorry any harm should come to him ; and for her sake I'd have no hand in doing him a hurt."

"Zoons, then we'll do without thee, Tom, when we give the lubber his deserts!" said Robin. "Though what you should want to spare him for I know not, since you're sweet on Ann ; and 'tis ten chances to one she'll turn sheep's eyes upon him if we don't settle his business while she's hot against him, as she is now."

"Ay, Tom," said the mean-looking Bill, coming close up to him, and sniggering in his face, "you've already got Ben to settle with; you don't want no more rivals, my lad. You'd best let us do her bidding, and carry him off and let him down the monks' well, when he shows his nose up here again!"

"I won't have no hand in it, mates," said Tom, stubbornly. "I don't mind a fight, man to man; I like it when my blood's up. But to land a man over the head when he's alone, and to bind him when he's dazed and can't do naught to defend hisself, why, that's no work for a man as is a man, and it ain't no work for me."

"Odso, man, we'll do as well without thee!" retorted Robin, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a huge red hand.

"Ay, and better too!" piped out Bill. "For there'll be one less to share the plunder; and——"

He was interrupted by a roar of mocking laughter from all the men within hearing.

"Ay, that's Bill Plunder, true to's name!" cried one. "Never no blow gets struck but

what he's thinking whether there's guineas to come out of it, or but a matter of shillings! But there'll be cursed little to take from a fellow that's but a lieutenant!"

"There's his laced coat, and his sword, and maybe somat handsome by way of a pistol," grumbled Bill, angrily. "Pickings worth having, any way, and that 'ud not find me too proud to tak 'em."

"Maybe you'll not have the chance, Bill, after all," said Tom. "Maybe the young officer'll know better nor to come."

"Not he!" retorted Bill. "He's got the spirit, deuce take him. He'll walk into the lion's mouth, sure as a die. And it's us that has to take care he don't walk out again."

"No fear o' that," said Robin, with an oath.

"What if he should come quiet?" suggested Tom.

"Sneaking by like them king's men do when they're after us?" cried Bill. "Dost think Ann won't keep too good a look-out for him for that? No. If he comes with the red-coats, she'll know long afore they be here, and they'll find all taut as they did yesterday morn."

And if he comes alone, he'll walk in right enough; but he'll never walk out no more!"

There was a hoarse laugh at this, which passed round the circle, as the men repeated the words the one to the other. And then, quite suddenly, there fell a silence upon them all.

Tregenna felt that his heart almost stopped beating; for he was under the impression, for the first moment, that he had been discovered. But the hush had hardly fallen upon the group below, when a faint tapping was heard upon one of the great doors of the barn.

"Ay, ay," sang out Robin. And turning to the others, as he rested from his hammering, he made a gesture to them, with his brawny arm, to put down their tools. "They're back," said he, "back from the shore. Down with the boat, mates, and let's see what luck they've had!"

Tregenna was furious on learning, as he did from these words, that on this very night there had been a smugglers' raid carried out in his absence.

But he had little time for reflection when



## MYSTERY OF THE GREY BARN. 155

a strange thing happened in the great barn below. The men stood silent all round, each holding a rope, which he had hastily untied from a post driven into the ground. At a signal from Robin, who directed the proceedings, the boat was slowly lowered until she had sunk below the level of the floor into the ancient crypt beneath.

For one moment the torches flashed and flared, as the men looked down at the unfinished hull of their boat. Then, just as Tregenna was wondering why the soldiers had not taken up the flooring-boards to look beneath them, he witnessed what he could not but confess was a very clever contrivance. A row of boards were placed, side by side, on high trestles across the boat, at a distance of some five feet below the chapel floor, which was then boarded over in the same way. On raising one of these upper boards, therefore, a stranger would have seen the false floor below, with a rough canvas thrown down upon it, which would have looked, in the imperfect light of the barn, like the bare ground.

So quickly, so quietly was this carried out,

that it took but a few minutes to transform the busy workshop into a bare, deserted place, when the men extinguished their torches and filed out quietly by the west door into the darkness and the drizzling rain.

The last of them had gone ; the great key had turned in the rusty lock ; and Tregenna was asking himself by which way it would be safest to descend, so that he might get away undetected by any of the smugglers, when he felt his left ankle gripped by a strong hand.



## CHAPTER XI.

### IN THE LION'S MOUTH.

IT was impossible for Tregenna to see the face of the man who had seized him by the leg ; for his own body was thrust through the hole between the boards which filled up the great east window.

He kicked out, however, with all his might ; and after a silent struggle of a few moments' duration, he managed to get rid of his assailant : and the next minute he heard him drop with a thud to the ground.

Tregenna saw on the left the smouldering torch of one of the men who had been at work inside the barn : he dared not, therefore, get down and cross the farmyard. Having withdrawn his shoulders from the hole in which he had wedged himself, he saw that the roof of the nearest outhouse was only some four feet


away. He contrived, by a risky spring, to reach the thatch ; and then it was easy to cross by the roofs of the outhouses to an open window of the farmhouse, through which he peeped.

It was dark outside, with the rain-clouds and the falling drizzle ; it was pitch-dark within, so that he could not even tell whether the window opened from a room or a passage. He listened ; but at first there was nothing to be heard but the wind among the tree-tops on the hill above, and the sound of the tread of footsteps in the soft straw of the farmyard.

Presently there was a stifled laugh, a murmur of rough voices, and then the tramp of horses' hoofs coming nearer and nearer along the road. Then there was a low whistle, which was answered by a voice close to where he stood under the window.

The men from the barn had gone out to meet their comrades returning from the raid.

On an instant the place seemed to be alive with unseen creatures, whispering, laughing, singing softly. Sheltered from observation from below, for the present at least, Tregenna



crouched down in the thatch, and wondered how long he would be safe from his late assailant. The next moment he saw a head appear above the eaves of one of the outhouses.

There was only one thing to be done, and he did it. Springing erect, he clutched at the sill of the open window, drew himself up to it, got inside, and closed it fast. Just as he secured the latch he saw, dimly indeed, but unmistakably, the figure of a rough-looking countryman on the roof outside. The closed window, however, baffled the fellow, for he went on crawling about over the thatch without any suspicion of the way by which his prey had escaped him.

Tregenna fancied, as he watched from behind the security of the latticed window, that he recognized in the fellow a rough-looking lad whom he had seen at work in the Parsonage garden.

The question now was, having got safely into the house, to get safely out again.

He groped about him, found the opposite wall at a distance of some five or six feet, and soon discovered that he was in a corridor,

running along the back wall of the house. Following it, he came to a corner, where the corridor, now cutting through the house to the front, with rooms on each side, led to a wide staircase with a handsome carved oak railing.

Here, however, he came to a standstill, not daring to go down. For the hall below led straight into the farmhouse kitchen, and there was no door.

Tregenna caught sight of a couple of men who were busy rolling spirit-kegs into a corner of the great room ; and he was prone on the floor on the instant, watching and listening. But though he heard plenty of noise, the entrance of the smugglers fresh from the raid, the greetings of their comrades from the Grey Barn, the rolling of barrels across the rough tiled floor, he saw no more. The outer door was out of his sight, and so was the fireplace ; and it was between door and fireplace that the movement of the company lay.

When he became sure of this fact, he stole softly down the staircase, which was entirely unlighted, and concealed himself behind the bend in the massive oak railing at the bottom.

By this time the noise of tongues, of tramping feet, of the bringing in of heavy wares, had become so loud that he was not afraid of his footsteps on the bare boards being heard.

As he stepped down upon the stone flags of the hall, the wavering light from the flaring torches in the kitchen fell upon what was now the front-door of the house ; he took a step towards it, thinking that he might escape by this way. But it was fastened by a heavy padlock, so that egress in this direction was impossible.

There was nothing to be done but to remain in concealment, and to hope for a chance of escape when the occupants of the house should have dispersed and gone to rest.

For the present he was safe ; and although he dared not advance far enough to see what was going on, his ears kept him pretty well informed of the course affairs were taking.

In the first place, he recognized among the new-comers three voices : those of Ben the Blast, of Long Jack, and of Ann Price, who, as he judged by the words she uttered and those addressed to her, must have been herself

with the raiders that night. They were jubilant over the skill with which they had evaded the king's men, who, it seemed, had not had a chance of coming up with them.


"'Twas all owing to the luck of the capt'n's being away!" said Ann's voice, in a decisive tone. "That fellow's the hardest nut we have to crack. The soldiers don't count!" she added contemptuously.

"Ay, but the question is, where was the capt'n, damn 'un!" retorted Ben the Blast, ferociously. "If so be you say you invited him hither, maybe he's on's way now, and that's how we missed 'un. Hey, Robin, have you seen any strangers about?"

Robin answered first with a characteristic curse.

"If so be as I had seen him," said he, savagely, "there'd be naught for to trouble your head about him no more!"

"Maybe, he's gone up to the Parsonage!" suggested Tom, who had entered the kitchen from the porch during Ben's speech. "Folks say he allus has an eye to the Parsonage when he goes by, spying to see if Mistress Joan's about."



"He'll get no good by doing that!" cried Ann, sharply. "Miss Joan'll never tell aught to harm us, for my mother's sake; 'twas she came herself to tell us, t'other day, that the red-coats were on their way hither."

"Ay," said Tom, "but 'tis not for information 'gainst us the lieutenant hangs about the Parsonage. 'Tis for Miss Joan's bright eyes, I'm thinking."

"Pshaw!" said Ann, contemptuously.

"She's a handsome, winsome lady," went on Tom, "and all the gentlemen be raving mad about her shape and her fine eyes. So 'tis no such wonder if he's struck, too."

"Miss Joan's well enough," returned Ann, though in a rather grudging tone; "but I think the lieutenant's got something better to do than run after a lass just now. Leastways, if he hasn't, we can find him something!" she added with acerbity.

"Ho, ho, ho! That can we!" roared Ben the Blast, laughing lustily.

In the midst of his mirth, in which the other men joined, there was an interruption. Some one ran in panting, and apparently in sufficient

disorder to warrant a feeling of alarm among the rest.


"Well, how now, Bill? What has frightened thee?" said Robin Cursemother; and his companions added their questions to the panting new-comer.

At last, when there was a pause, he blurted out—

"There's spies about, mates; there's eyes been a-watching us while we was at our work in the barn to-night!" Instantly there was a confusion of tongues, so great that for a few moments he was allowed to get breath, while his companions pressed round him, with oaths and abrupt questionings. When he was able to go on, he said, "'Twas a lad from the village yonder as told me, young Will Bramley, that lives down by the ma'shes, and works up at Parsonage."

"Well!"

"Well, Oi caught 'un as he were a getting off the roof of the little shippen, and he got away, runnin' as hard as he could towards the village yonder. But Oi come oop with him, and Oi says, says Oi, 'What be tha doing of?'





says Oi. 'Tha've been spying,' says Oi. Then says he: "'Tain't Oi as have been spying, Bill Plunder,' says he. And he told as how 'twere Miss Joan Langney as had sent him for to see if there was spies about the barn, and as how he'd caught hold of a man's leg that was a-looking through the slit in the big barn winder to-night."

As Bill Plunder uttered these words, a storm of curses and oaths burst from the listening smugglers. There was a movement, a stamping of feet, a rattling of weapons. And Tregenna, brave man though he was, felt the blood run cold in his veins, as he thought of the fate which would be his if he should fall into their hands that night.

"'Twas the lieutenant, for sure! Curses on him!" cried Ben the Blast, bringing his heavy heel down sharply on the tiled floor as he spoke. "And whither did he go? Answer that! Whither, I say, whither?"

"That the lad didn't know no more'n you do. He said as how he caught hold of the leg of the fellow that was spying, and as how he was flung off and down to the ground. And


as how he looked and looked, and searched and hunted, but couldn't get not so much as a sight of him no more. And as how he dursn't call to any of us, for fear as he should be caught for a spy hisself. That's the lad's tale, and Oi believe it's the truth, for 'od's fish, Oi made him tremble in's shoes."

"Why didst not bring him hither?" asked Robin, shortly. "We'd have knocked the truth out of's maw, I'll warrant! Which way did he go, blockhead?"

"'Tis no matter for the boy!" cried Ben, in a voice of thunder. "'Tis for the man we must be looking! Do you, mates, search the yard and the shippens, while Ann and me'll do the bit of road, and the bushes in front yonder!"

"He'll be gotten clear away by this," grumbled Gardener Tom.

"Not he. 'Tis for spying he's come, and he'd not go back so soon, and with all of us about, too. Nay, he'll be on the premises still, somewheres, and, odds my life, we'll make short work of him when we find him. We'll tie him on the brown mare, and whip him till



he swoons, and then we'll put his body down the Monks' Well that lies t'other side of the hill yonder."

Then the shrill, thin, whining voice of Long Jack broke in upon the thunder of the others. Almost sobbing, and speaking in accents of real terror, he said, thickly, and with uncertain intonation—

"How now, mates, how now? Best leave well alone. Besht leave well alone, Oi say, and may Heaven Almighty pardon us what we've done this noight! It's ill work is murder, and it'll be murder if you come against him this noight."

Ben the Blast gave a contemptuous grunt. "Ugh!" cried he, surlily; "drop that snivelling, Jack! Thou are loike to a wolf with a knife in thy hand and thy blood up; but no sooner art thou cold again, than thy tears flow as fast as thy liquor. Get thee to bed, mate, so thou doesn't loike the sound of our singing, nor of the tune we shall sing to."

But Long Jack, still sighing and moaning, got up and staggered down the room. Tre-genna, with his heart in his mouth, saw him

lurch towards the hall where he was in hiding. But Long Jack, who was unsteady on his legs, had but taken a few steps out of his right course, Bill Plunder ran after him, and fetched him back ; and the tall, lean, miserable-looking rascal and his small ferret-faced companion went again out of sight together.

They all trooped out quickly, leaving, as Tregenna knew by the lull, only Ben the Blast and Ann in the kitchen. They had taken some of the torches with them, too ; for the light had become very dim, even on the whitewashed lower walls ; while the great timbered roof overhead was now in pitchy blackness.

There was a silence when Ben and Ann were alone together, after he had gone to the door and slammed it. Then she began to hum softly to herself.

"What art a-singing for?" asked Ben, gruffly.

"To keep up my spirits maybe," returned she, saucily.

"Thou didst not need for to keep up thy spirits till latterly ; they was allus up," said



Ben. "What's come to thee these last days? Is't since what happened t'other day that thou'rt so down in the mouth? Is't that thou wouldst like to be even with them that's done thee so ill a turn—eh, lass?"

"Ay, that would I," answered Ann, savagely. "I do thirst to pay back as good as I've been given. I'm none of your soft ones, as you know, Ben."

"Odso, don't Oi know it? It's why Oi loike thee, Ann. Give me a lass, says Oi, as can deal you a blow with her fist if she's a mind, loike as you did t'other day, when Oi did but ask for a smack of the lips. The day yon cursed lieutenant tried to come atween us, you mind, Ann?"

"Ay, I remember," said Ann, who, with native intelligence, spoke much better than did any of her companions, and, indeed, nearly as well as the country gentlefolk. "I played the poor lad a neat trick, and left him to get back through the mud of the lanes as best he could."

"Serve him roight, too!" retorted Ben, roughly. "Oi should be main sorry to think

you had any sneaking loiking for a king's man, Ann ; a lass of spirit loike you ! ”

“ I've no liking for anybody,” said Ann, impatiently ; “ but my own kin and my own kind. Liking, indeed ! What dost take me for, to speak as if I'd aught of a feeling of kindness for the young rascal that's done more harm to us in a month than the rest of the king's men have in half a year ! ”

“ That's roight, lass ; spoke with spirit. Spoke loike my cousin, my good cousin, that's to be my woife ! ”

“ Time enough for talk of that, Ben, when we get the coast clear of the cutter's men and the red-coats ! ” said Ann, shortly. “ And now, let's to our work ; 'tis for us to search the road for this young spark. 'Tis but a matter of form, though ; for he'll be back to his ship long ere this ! ”

“ You think so ? ”

“ I'm sure on't. ”

“ Still, you'll have a hunt for him ? ”

“ Ay, and if I find him, I pray Heaven I may find him alone. I should like to settle accounts with him—by myself—dearly, dearly ! ”

She spoke between her clenched teeth. And Ben laughed.

"Roight, Ann," said he. "Oi'll hand him over if he comes my way. 'Odsfish; Oi'd never wish a man worse than to come your way while you be in that humour!"

"I always have a mind to pay my own scores myself," said Ann, viciously. "So do you, Ben. Take to the right, down towards the bridge, whilst I search in the bushes in front, yonder. There's many a hiding-place there the fellow might have chosen, if 'tis true that he's still on the watch."

"Oons, Oi'll not thwart thee. So here's for the bridge. Thou'lt not give me a kiss before Oi go—eh, lass?"

"Dost think I'm in the mood for kissing?" retorted Ann, sharply.

And it was abundantly clear that she got rid of her too obtrusive admirer with the physical violence he professed to admire so much; for Tregenna heard a sort of scuffling going on, and then Ben's tread and his voice were heard no more; but the door was opened, letting in a rush of cold air, and then slammed with great force.

Ann did not at once follow her admirer to take up her own allotted share in the search for the spy. Tregenna heard her somewhat heavy tread in the great kitchen, as if she were slowly pacing up and down at the end of the room near the fireplace.

Should he disclose himself to her, to this enigmatical woman with the calm manner and the fierce heart? Or should he wait and watch the course of events, hoping for a chance of escape?

As he put this question to himself, he heard a door open in the corridor above, and saw the glimmer of a rushlight reflected on the ceiling. The old woman who had received him and the brigadier on their previous visit to the farm had come out into the corridor, and was moving slowly towards the back of the house. In a few moments she returned with a much quicker step, and coming to the head of the staircase, called, in an anxious whisper—

“Ann!”

From the kitchen, at that moment, there came the sound of the flinging down of something heavy, with a noise that echoed in the old rafters above.



Ann!" repeated the old woman more shrilly.

Ann's voice had a muffled sound, as she answered, as if she were speaking from a great distance—

"Hey, mother, is't you?"

"Ay, lass. There's summat wrong. I minded a while ago to have left the passage window open, with the rain coming in. And now I find it shut, and marks of a man's tread on the floor here!"

Ann's answer rang out sharp and clear—

"Right, mother. I'll see to't! Go you back to bed!"

The old woman lingered but for one instant, turning to the right and to the left the iron stand which held her rushlight. Naturally the feeble light showed her very little. The prints of muddy boots were continued down the stairs, but she did not care to trace them out, feeling, probably, that such investigations might safely be left to the energetic Ann.

With a grunt and a muttered grumble she retreated into her own room, and Tregenna heard her draw the bolt on the inner side of the door.

He heard the click of a pistol which, as he imagined, the intrepid Ann was trying. But he felt that the moment for decisive action had come. He would not be discovered hiding behind the staircase like a thief.

Coming out of his corner, therefore, he went into the big kitchen, to present himself to the redoubtable Ann.

The great hall looked a weird place, with the flickering of the log-fire and the glimmer of a dying torch for all illumination. Round about the wide hearth were piled bales of goods and kegs of spirits, while the table groaned under a weight of jugs and tankards, joints of beef, and long, flat home-made loaves, generous preparation for the smugglers' supper.

In front of the hearth and between the two wide oak settles there was a gaping chasm, a hole in the floor of which Tregenna was not long in guessing the meaning. The heavy wooden lid, by day artfully concealed by a piece of rough matting, apparently placed there for the comfort of the old people who sat on each side, was now thrown back; and

it was by this lid that the solitary occupant of the huge apartment was now standing.

Although he was in part prepared for the discovery, Tregenna gave a slight start on finding himself face to face with this being.

For he saw before him not Ann Price the decent farmer's daughter, with her neat cap and snow-white apron, her calm face and quiet manners; but Jem Bax, the young smuggler, with the rough shock of shoulder-length hair, the seaman's breeches, and high boots, the loose shirt, open jacket, and flowing tie, with the pale set face, and fierce devil-may-care expression.

And even now that he knew them to be one and the same person, he could hardly be surprised that he had not guessed the truth before. For, as there had seemed to be nothing masculine about Ann in her skirts and cap: so now in Jem Bax, in coat and breeches, he could see no trace of the woman.

## CHAPTER XII.

## SETTLING ACCOUNTS.

WHEN Tregenna came in, with his wide hat under his arm, and with the easy air of a casual caller, it was Ann who appeared more startled than he did.

She had had one foot on the nearest settle, and had been engaged in priming one of her pistols. But on seeing the intruder she started erect, drew from her belt a second pistol, which was already charged, and levelled it at his head.

It missed fire, however, and Tregenna sauntered up the room towards her, as if such a trifle as the attempted discharge of a pistol at him were the greeting he was most accustomed to.

"Good evening, Mistress Ann," said he, with a low bow, when he had come within half a dozen paces of her.

She replied by a scowl, and by a muttered

whisper between her teeth of a very unfeminine kind. Nothing daunted, he still came on ; and knowing perfectly the artful character of his opponent, and profiting by her momentary confusion and annoyance at the failure of her weapon, he seized her by both wrists, forced her into a seat, and placed himself beside her, still firmly holding both her hands.

"Curse you ! What are you going to do to me ?"

"Nothing but keep you quiet for a few minutes till I get a chance of getting away."

She laughed scornfully.

"You won't get away. Not even if you kill me. We've got you fast this time."

She glared at him, her face within a foot of his, with eyes full of passionate hate.

"In the mean time *I've* got *you* fast, for the moment, and I intend——"

She interrupted him, breathing heavily, and almost snorting defiance.

"To humble me, to humiliate me, to treat me as—as——"

It was Tregenna's turn to interrupt, which he did with a scorn as steady as her own.


"As a woman! Troth, no! There's nothing less likely, nothing less possible, I assure you. I intend to treat you—I am treating you—as Jem Bax the smuggler, as hardened a ruffian as I've ever met, as ferocious as a savage, and with naught of the other sex about him but the cunning and the meanness!"

"Meanness!"

She quailed under the word. For the first time she flinched, and her eyelids quivered.

"Yes. 'Twould be vastly mean in a man to attempt to harm the enemy who had come to his succour, had promised to pardon him, to let him escape. In a woman 'twould be worse than meanness; but what 'tis accounted by a creature of your sort, that's neither honest man nor true woman, why, in sooth, I know not!"

Again her grey eyes flashed a steely fire as they met his. There was a sudden touch of sex in the lowered eyelids, in the flush which came into her cheek, as she felt the young man's gaze full upon her, saw his handsome features so near her own. She drew a deep, shuddering breath, and then said, in a fierce



whisper, turning away her head, and moving nervously under the touch of his strong hands—

“I care not to be helped, to be pardoned, by one who stands to me as a foe! ’Twas the first time I’d had a check, the first time I’d been hurt. The others—my comrades—might look at me askance, I thought, might treat me as a mere woman, despise me, when once they found me hurt, wounded, like one of themselves.”

“Still, you need not have let your feminine spitefulness carry you so far!”

“Feminine spitefulness!” echoed she; and she made a sudden, vain attempt to wrench her hands away. “Pshaw, you don’t understand! And in truth I did you no hurt.”

“’Twas the fault of your feminine arm!” retorted Tregenna. “The intention was bad; so, thank Heaven, was your aim!”

She clenched her teeth in rage and agony. Tregenna was interested, excited, in spite of himself, by this sudden revelation of the woman who looked upon herself as a sort of Joan of Arc, invulnerable, triumphant,

bringing good fortune to her friends and ill luck to her enemies. He began to understand the movement of impotent rage which had caused her to behave so ungenerously. And he saw, too, that she now felt ashamed of her act of treachery, that she writhed beneath his taunts.

"Let me go," cried she, suddenly. "You—you—— Damn it, you hurt me!"

Unfeminine as the reproach was, Tregenna was not unaffected by it. Not a very lovely or lovable side of a woman's nature was this that she was revealing to him; but a woman's it was for all that.

"Well," said he, after a moment's pause, "I will let you go."

"You'll trust me?" cried she, quite eagerly.

"No," retorted he, coolly. "I won't trust you. But I can trust to my own limbs to hold my own in a struggle with you."

And he released her. She sprang up, drew back her shirt-sleeves, and looked at the red marks on her wrists.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," said Tregenna.

"So am not I," retorted Ann. "I'll show



these marks to my kinsmen, my comrades ; 'twill spur their spirits to see I have been so used."

"Egad, they need but little spurring ! And in truth you would do better, if you care for your kinsmen, to warn them to desist from their unlawful practices. The king and the Government are alike resolved to put them down. A handful of men—and women—be they never so bold, can scarce hope to hold out long against such forces as they can bring."

Ann laughed derisively.

"You know us not," said she, disdainfully, "if you think we can be cowed into submission either by red-coats on the land, or blue-jackets on the water. 'Tis in our blood to like the fight as well as the booty. There be spirits among us—and I own myself one of them—would care little for the cargo but for the chance of a pistol-shot about our ears in the landing of it !"

"But one of these nights you may find the bullets whizz by a little too near, and see your lover shot down by your side."

Ann, who, conscious that Tregenna was

watching her narrowly, had disdainfully withdrawn to some little distance, and was pacing up and down, throwing from time to time a sidelong glance at him, turned, planted her feet firmly, and put her hands on her hips in a defiant manner.

"My lover!" said she. "And pray who may he be?"

"Well, I know not which is the favoured one," said Tregenna. "But I gather from what I have heard—overheard, that there are two who crave your favour: one Gardener Tom, a handsome lad, too good for his vile trade, and he they call Ben the Blast, for whom, truly, I feel no great liking."

"Well, then, sir, know this: little as your liking for him may be, 'tis greater than mine. And as for young Tom, why, in truth I should be sorry to see him fall, but 'twould be for his mother's sake, and not for my own. As you said but some minutes since, I am ill-fitted to deal in such small wares as kisses and caresses!"

"Nay, I said not so, Mistress Ann."

"You said you looked not upon me as upon a woman."

"But there be other men that do so look upon you."

Ann came a little nearer, and smiled grimly.

"Ay, there's your friend the general. He looked upon me with a most kindly eye. And there's young Master Bertram at Hurst Court, that craves a kiss whene'er he sees me. You cannot understand their taste, sir, doubtless? For you a woman must have soft hands and black eyes, like Mistress Joan Langney?"

There was something surprising in the sort of curious scorn with which she put these questions, as if interested, though somewhat disdainfully, in his answer. Tregenna, who was leaning back on the settle, as easily as if enjoying his rest in an inn, smiled a little.

"Ay, truly I do not know where you would find a fairer specimen of womanhood than the vicar's daughter."

His face softened as he spoke. Ann came a few steps nearer to him, watching him with a slight frown.

"Yet she hath small liking for you. She is on our side, you know. 'Twas she that warned us of your coming with the soldiers."

"She will no longer be on your side when she hears that you have murdered me, Mistress Ann."

"Murdered you?"

"I understood that to be your intention."

"You take it coolly."

"'Tis as well to save my heat till 'tis wanted."

"Maybe you don't think I shall be as good as my word?"

"I have no reason to doubt that you can be as good as your word when you have promised to do something vile and mischievous!"

Ann snorted with anger.

"Yet you can admire a woman of spirit in the parson's daughter!"

"Spirit! Egad, it needs no spirit to call in half a score of your villainous confederates to make an end to one man."

Ann came up and planted herself before him.

"I wanted no confederates to help me with you. I did propose that task for myself," said she, "in return for the humbling you gave me t'other day in sight of all my friends."

"Ay, so you did. But your pistol missed

fire, and I was too quick for you afterwards."

Even as he spoke his taunting words, he saw her hand go quickly towards the cutlass she carried at her side. And he smiled as he sprang up and changed his place to the other settle, thus putting the open trap-door to the cellar below between himself and her.

"Come," said she, frowning and tossing back her short hair like a fury, "you shall not say but I play you fair. Out with your sword and fight me again, as you did that day. If you get the best of it this time I'll see you safe out of this, I give you my word."

Tregenna shook his head.

"I can neither take your word, nor fight you," said he, lightly.

"You have fought me before! Did you find me such a contemptible foe?"

"No, indeed. But—I knew you not then for a woman."

"Well, and you own me not for a woman now!"

"Just too much of a woman for me to fight with you I will own you to be."

"Well, then, since you find me too much of a woman to be fought with, you shall find me woman enough to give me a kiss."

"Nay, madam, I would rather be excused from that mark of your favour also. A kiss may be given with the lips and a stab with the hand at the same time."

"You shall make fast my hands with this rope, sir, and then maybe you will be satisfied of my harmlessness."

"Nay, madam, 'twould take more than a rope to satisfy me of that!" retorted Tregenna.

Ann laughed; and he was surprised to note the change which had come over her countenance. This fierce creature, who but a moment ago had looked like a fiend with her glittering eyes and frowning brows, had been transformed, by a fresh gust of the passions which were so strong in her, to a being gentle, mild, humble, and submissive; and all the more dangerous on that account.

"You are hard to please, sir," said she, in a low voice; "harder to please than any man I have ever met before!"

And she gave him a steady glance of her

glowing eyes which was a fresh revelation as to her strongly emotional temperament. He began to understand the hold she got on the men she met, high and low, her equals and her superiors, as he noted the transformation from the bold and daring front of the young buccaneer to the modest mien and diffident voice of the more gracious members of her sex.

And he acknowledged to himself that the two sides to her nature gave her a fascination, an odd attractiveness, which made her a creature unique, unapproachable, dangerous.

"I think, Mistress Joan," said he, "'twould be better for us if you pleased us less easily."

She laughed again, showing her beautiful sound white teeth in a most winning mirthfulness which seemed to be wholly without guile. Tregenna, however, was still cautious. The very fact that she now seemed to him to be handsome, whereas hitherto he had thought her features somewhat homely, was enough to put him on his guard.

"Nay, sir, I am not the foul foe you imagine. You shall not fare ill at my hands, if 'twere but for the bold stand you have made against

me!" said she. "You shall pledge me in a cup of wine; and you shall find it none the less invigorating that it has never paid duty!"

The archness with which she spoke was charming, irresistible. Tregenna watched her with amusement, interest, admiration, as she went to the table and poured out a full tankard from a flagon that stood at one end of the board. She turned to bring it to him, with a grave, rough grace that was odd and subtly attractive, when there came on a sudden a succession of sharp raps on the door.

Tregenna sprang to his feet, thinking that the smugglers were at hand.

Ann put the tankard hurriedly down on the table, and bounding forward to the place where he stood beside the gaping hole in the floor, she gave him a sudden push which sent him headlong into the cellar below, and shut down the trap-door.



## CHAPTER XIII.

### A LATE VISITOR.

TREGENNA was so much taken by surprise by the suddenness of the attack made upon him by Ann, that he did not realize her intention until he found himself lying on something which was luckily not very hard, on the cellar floor, in complete darkness.

He had not had far to fall ; for the bales of silk which had been flung in from above were piled high, and made, moreover, a more comfortable resting-place than kegs of spirits would have done.

He floundered about in the darkness, with difficulty finding a footing, and wondered in what spirit Ann had made him thus a prisoner. Was it to shield him from the attacks of her confederates? Or was it to prevent his finding an opportunity for escape?

This latter explanation seemed to him the more probable of the two. The woman was crafty, passionate, not to be trusted; and she had seized the first chance which presented itself for putting him completely in her power.

In the mean time, while he recovered from the momentarily stupefying effects of his fall, he could at first make out nothing of what was going on in the great kitchen above. A distant murmur, undoubtedly that of voices, did indeed reach his ears; but it was not until he had been down there for some minutes that he heard heavy footsteps on the tiled floor above him, and was able to distinguish the voice of Ann, and then of the new-comer, whom, from his halting gait and from what he could hear of his voice, he guessed to be Gardener Tom.

Tregenna piled the bales up together, mounted on them, and having thus brought his head near the level of the floor, listened intently.

The two speakers had by this time come to the hearth, and it was possible to distinguish

most of their words. Tom was displeased with her reception of himself.

"Well, Ann, 'twas no such easy matter for me to get up the hill to tell thee, and I reckoned for sure on a word of thanks. 'Tis well to be prepared when visitors come so late ; and, as I tell thee, he'll be here in a few minutes."

"'Tis but the parson, maybe, called out to see some one that's ill or dying."

"Ay, maybe 'tis he, for 'tis a horse that may be his by the look of him. But it may be the lieutenant, come to see what's toward ; and, in that case, you'd do well to put those kegs out of sight, and to give warning to the lads to keep close till he's gone."

There was a pause. Ann made no answer. By the angry tone in which Tom presently went on speaking, Tregenna guessed that she had smiled, or made some gesture which aroused the lover's suspicions.

"Well, why dost thou not answer me ? Art so sure 'tis not the lieutenant ? Hast seen him thyself ? Hast——"

"Nay, nay, Tom, are they not all out yonder looking for him ?"

"Ay, and maybe thou knowst where he is all the toime! Thou canst not always be trusted, Ann, e'en by thy own friends. And I'd not trust thee with a pretty fellow like yon lieutenant. Maybe you got rid of us all that you moight have it out with him by yourself. Eh, lass, eh?"

And Tregenna could tell, by the sound of moving feet, that Tom was searching round the room.

Ann, who was standing on the trap-door, laughed easily.

"Jealous, eh, Tom? 'Tis late in the day, with me! First 'tis Ben the Blast, and now a king's man! Hast no better opinion of thyself, Tom, than to think thou wouldst be ousted so easy?"

"Oons, lass, I've a better opinion of myself than I have of thee, for such a thing as constancy! And for being ousted, as thou calls it, plague on me if I know I was ever in!"

"Come, now, Tom, han't I always been kind to thee?"

"Ay, when you wanted to get summat from

me. Other toimes, I've to take thy kindness turn and turn about with Ben!"

"Fie on you, Tom, fie on you! Get you gone, and learn better manners than to speak to a woman so!"

She gave him a push in the direction of the door; but Tom was firm. Lame as he was, he managed to escape her, and came back to the trap-door over the hearth, where a slight noise, made by Tregenna in his endeavours to keep his footing on the bales in the dark, had caught his trained ears.

He stooped quickly, and tried to raise the door. There was the sound of a scuffle, of a fall, and then Tom growled out—

"Now, by the Lord, Mistress Innocence, I've got you! You've got some one in hiding below there, and 'tis the lieutenant, I'll stake my loife!"

"And what if 'twere?" retorted Ann, coolly. "Dost think I want a lesson from thee how to treat folks? Canst not thou trust me to do the best for us all?"

"Most toimes, yes, Ann. But not where a handsome man's in the business. Oh, lass,

I know thee! Thou'rt a monstrous foine lass, and I love thee. But I wouldn't trust thee with a fresh face too near thine, so 'twere as handsome a one as the lieutenant's, d—— him!"

"And caast thou not trust me to know how to shut a man's mouth, to stop his ears, to bind his hands?" hissed out Ann, with her lips close to his ear and her voice low and earnest.

"Oons, no!" shouted Tom, with redoubled anger. "Not where thy fancy's caught, as I do believe 'tis caught now! I believe thou wouldst let us all hang for him, while thy fancy lasted, and kill thyself for spite and grief afterward. That's what I think of thee, Ann Price, and oons! to save thee from that grief, and to save all our necks, I'm going to tell the rest of the lads who thy visitor is!"

"You would dare!"

But before the words were well out of her mouth, Gardener Tom, with a fierce oath, had flung down a heavy wooden chair to impede her steps, and swung out of the house at a gait which, considering his lameness, was a rapid one.

Ann dashed into the porch after him, but stopped short with a cry on finding herself face to face with a tall figure enveloped in a long, hooded riding-cloak.

"Miss Joan!" cried she, in amazement.

Joan, who was standing at the entrance of the porch, with her horse's bridle on her arm, held out her hand; but she sighed as she did so, for she knew well the meaning of the attire Ann was wearing.

"I like not to see you in that dress, Ann," said she. "'Tis bad enough for the men to be at these tricks; but 'tis worse in a woman!"

"You be grown mighty moral, Miss Joan!"

"Let me come in," said her visitor, shortly. "I have something to say to you."

And as she spoke, Joan made fast the horse's bridle to an iron staple in the wall of the porch, and entered the great kitchen.

"You have no one here?" she asked, as she glanced round the big room, and peered into the dim corners where the kegs were piled high.

"You see I have no one, Miss Joan," answered Ann, in a somewhat constrained tone.

"But you had better hasten, if you would not meet some of our rough folks; they'll be in here ere long."

"I know," said Joan. And she turned abruptly to meet Ann's eyes, with a face full of anxiety. "They're outside, searching the neighbourhood on all sides; and I can conjecture for whom they search."

Ann looked down on the floor.

"Come, Ann, I can trust you to tell me what I would fain know," went on Joan, quickly. "Lieutenant Tregenna—know you aught of him? He said he should come hither, by your invitation."

"Ay, and you were so anxious to know what I should do with him, that you sent a lad, Will Bramley, to be on the watch against his coming! Bill, that they call 'Plunder,' did find the lad, and learnt his errand, ere he let him go back to you."

"'Tis true. I sent Will to see that he came to no harm. Even as I would not suffer the lieutenant to do harm to you or to poor Tom, for your mother's sake and for the sake of Tom's kindness when I was a child; so would





not I have you do harm to him, since I know him for a brave man, and one that but does his duty in pursuing you and your kindred."

"And 'tis for him you have taken this journey, by yourself, on a night like this? Sure, Miss Joan, the lieutenant would feel flattered did he but know."

"I would do as much for any man, were it a matter of life or death, as I do truly think 'tis in this case!" said Joan, with spirit.

"Ay, 'twill be death to him if he meets with Ben, or with Tom, either!" said Ann, mockingly.

"Tom! Oh, Tom would do him no harm if he did but know how much I care!" burst out Joan, with sudden passion.

There was a second's pause; and then Ann put her hands to her hips, and laughed long and loudly—

"Ho—ho! How much you care! You have confessed, Miss Joan, you have confessed! To be sure you would not be so eager if the lieutenant were pock-marked, and of the age of your father!"

Her tone was so offensive that Joan, who

was accustomed to be treated by her with deference and respect, was not only hurt but astonished.

"I understand you not, Ann," said she at last, with dignity.

"Nay, Miss Joan, I should have thought 'twas as easy for you to understand me, as 'tis for me to understand you. This young king's man, being a pretty fellow, has taken your fancy, 'tis easy to see! Oh, blush not, Miss Joan: 'tis a common complaint you suffer from. The young ladies at Hurst Court feel, I warrant me, much as you do yourself on this matter."

Joan's answer was given modestly, but with some dignity.

"If I blush at your words, Ann, 'tis because of the tone in which you utter them," she said, in a low voice, but so distinctly that every word reached Tregenna's ears, as, indeed, they reached his heart also. "'Tis no shame to have a liking for a brave man: and if all the world has the same, there is the less reason for my concealing it."

"Well, 'tis a pity your kindness for him hath brought you so far, alone, and by night," said

Ann, dryly. "For 'tis a bad road you have to traverse on your way back, and none the safer for the rough fellows that are abroad, and that will be by this scarce sober enough to tell the parson's daughter from a farm wench on her way back from market."

"I can take care of myself, Ann, I thank you," answered Joan, coldly; "so you will but give me your word that Lieutenant Tregenna is not here to your knowledge, I'll return at once."

There was a moment's pause. Tregenna, who heard the question, waited with interest for the answer. Ann gave it in solemn tones—

"He is not here."

"'Tis well, then. I'll return." She took a step towards the door, and then stopped. There was a sudden change to wistfulness in her tone which touched Tregenna to the quick when he heard her next words, "Ann, should he be brought hither: should your kinsmen find him and bring him to you, as I know they would do, you'll—you'll spare him, you'll do him no hurt, for my sake, Ann, for the sake of what I have done for you?"

Again there was a pause. Then Ann answered, with a mocking laugh—

“Oh, he shall not be treated worse than his deserts, I’ll warrant you!”

There was a bitterness in her tone which appalled both her hearers. Joan stepped hurriedly back into the room, and cried, in a ringing voice—

“Then, troth, Ann, I will not leave this roof till your friends have come back!”

“You had better go, Miss Joan,” retorted Ann, dryly. “My mates, and specially after a raid, are no companions for a gentlewoman.”

“Nor are they to be trusted in their treatment of a gentleman. So, faith, Ann, I will stay till I learn what has become of Lieutenant Tregenna.”

The girl’s unseen hearer could contain himself no longer. He had at first thought that it would be safer for Joan to return to her home in ignorance of his presence in the farmhouse. But on hearing her express this brave resolution, he felt that there was nothing for it but to make his presence known to her. He, therefore, dealt three sounding blows on the

trap-door above his head with one of his pistols. The weight of the door was so great, especially as Ann was still standing on it, that it did not move. But the noise he made arrested Joan's attention, and aroused her suspicion.

"What's that?" she cried, as she came nearer to Ann.

The blows were repeated, and then Tregenna's voice, muffled but recognizable, reached her ears :

"Lift up this door, Mistress Ann. Let me out, or I'll put a bullet through it."

And as he spoke, he succeeded in raising the trap-door a couple of inches, and in thrusting the muzzle of his pistol through the aperture.

Ann, with a muttered oath, raised the trap-door, and flung it back upon the settle.

"Out with you, then!" cried she, defiantly, as she planted herself a foot or so away from the chasm thus made, and stared down upon him sullenly. "Out with you, and off with you! And may the devil catch your heels!"

Thus adjured, Tregenna proceeded to pile


up the bales of silk in order to reach the level of the kitchen floor. Joan, who was very white, and who had never uttered a sound since hearing his voice, came forward to help him.

As she held out her firm white hand, he grasped it in his with a warm, strong pressure, which brought the red blood back to her face. The next moment they were standing side by side, and face to face with Ann, whose grey eyes flashed in diabolical anger as she looked at them.

Only for a moment. Recovering herself quickly, so that they might almost have fancied that the evil expression they had seen on her features was the effect of fancy only, she closed the trap-door, and threw herself on the nearest settle, with a loud burst of laughter.

"Well done, well done, both of you!" cried she, as she clapped her hands in boisterous applause. "Sure, 'twas as fine a comedy as ever was played up in London before the quality, to see Miss Joan's face when she heard your voice, Lieutenant."

While she laughed, Joan in her turn was slowly recovering her self-possession.



"'Tis well, Ann, that it went not so far as to become tragedy rather than comedy," she said, as she glanced hurriedly towards the door. Then pointing towards it with a hand that was scarcely steady, she said to Tregenna, "I beg, sir, you will mount my horse, that is waiting outside, and make the best of your way back to your vessel. Nay, fear not to leave me here. They'll not harm me, as Ann will tell you."

"Miss Joan," replied Tregenna, in a shaking voice, as he looked into her noble face with eyes in which his admiration and gratitude glowed like fire, "I'd not leave you in this nest of rascaldom if I were to be torn in pieces for disobeying you."

"You do not understand. I am safe here : you are not," replied she, in a low voice, which scarcely reached the listening ears of Ann.

"It may be so, but I'll not risk it. I'll not leave this house without you."

"Leave it with me, then," said Joan, making up her mind with promptitude. "You shall mount my horse, and I'll ride behind." And turning quickly to Ann, "Good night," said she somewhat coldly.


But she got no answer. Ann was watching them both with no very friendly eyes. Sitting on the edge of the great table, and looking again to the life the dare-devil buccaneer, as she tossed her short hair, threw back her head, and swung one foot with great energy, she waved one hand impatiently, as if to speed the departure of the lieutenant and Joan, but uttered no word of farewell.

Then Tregenna tried. Going back a step, he held out his hand.

"Come, Mistress Ann," said he, "I'll not credit that you would have done me a hurt, here in your own house, however fierce a foe you might be in a hand-to-hand conflict outside. Let us part friends here, even if we meet as antagonists hereafter."

For answer Ann put down her hands, one on each side of her, grasping the edge of the table; and tilted herself backwards, laughing maliciously in his face.

"My friendship is of no account to you, sir," said she, very slowly, in a low, deep, and full voice, "at present. You shall have it, maybe, later."





And she turned her head disdainfully in the direction of Joan, who was by this time in the doorway, and signified to him by a haughty bend of the head that he had better follow the young lady.

Tregenna bowed and accepted the suggestion.

A minute later he was on the back of the parson's bay horse, with Joan behind him, holding on by the belt round his waist.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## A PERILOUS RIDE.

ALTHOUGH so much had passed since Joan's arrival at the farmhouse, it had all taken place within the space of a few minutes. She herself, and Ann and Tregenna, had all been at too great tension of the nerves to be dilatory either in speech or action.

When, therefore, Tregenna felt the touch of Joan's hands on his belt, he saw, at the same moment, the figure of Gardener Tom at a very short distance away, between them and the bridge. He was going down the hill, presumably in search of his comrades; but his lameness prevented his getting along very fast.

Tregenna was about to speak, when Joan uttered, very low in his ear, a warning "Sh—sh," and pointed upwards, in the direc-

tion of a road that went past the farm and over the hill behind it.

Understanding without any words that she thought it prudent to return to Hurst by a different and less direct way than the road by which they had come, he turned the horse's head at once in the direction she indicated.

They rode for some distance in silence. The drizzling rain had now almost ceased, and the moon was showing fitfully behind ragged, driving clouds. Their way lay at first along a very bad road, which had the merit of being open to the fields on either side, so that they were sure at least that they could not be attacked without warning. They thus remained for some time in sight of the farmhouse; but though Joan watched the building as well as she could in the feeble and fitful moonlight, she could make out no sign of any creature stirring near it, until for a moment, as they neared the top of the hill, the moon shone out for an instant brightly on the valley at their feet.

Then a low cry escaped her lips.

"There is a horse coming out from the farm

stables," said she, "and going down the hill towards the bridge. Ay, and there is a second and a third. But one of the three is mounted; the others are led by the rider of the first."

"Well," said Tregenna, noticing the alarm in her tone. "And what think you that portends?"

"Why, 'tis that Ann has saddled them and is leading them forth, for what purpose, unless it be to attack us on our way to Hurst, I cannot imagine. I would now we had kept the straight, short road, and risked passing the searchers. Now I fear they may come up with us, since they will be mounted, and will lie in wait."

The suggestion was not a pleasant one. But Tregenna was at first rather incredulous.

"Surely," said he, "she would not have let us go forth unmolested, if she had meant ill by us! And they would not touch your father's daughter, villains though they be. You and he are both too well known, and too much respected even by the wrong-doers."

"Nay, sir, I fear you exaggerate our powers and our position. These men do truly show

us some respect, in return for my father's labours among them. But the least thing will turn them from kindness to savagery. And Ann is in that respect but little better than they, I fear."

"She is a most extraordinary woman!"

"You may well say that. The more extraordinary, the more one knows of her. She can be as tender as a woman ought to be, as I have proved many a time, when I have besought her kindness for the poor and sick in her neighbourhood or in ours. But she can also be as fierce as the fiercest man, as you, sir, have, I believe, already proved."

"Ay, that have I. And truly I think her fierceness is more to be depended on than her kindness. She hates me for having, as she considers, humbled her in the fight t'other day. And I am much inclined to think she would never have suffered me to go forth from the farmhouse alive, had you not most happily come to my rescue."

As he uttered these last words, in a tone which betrayed the depth of his feeling, he was conscious of a tremor which ran through

Joan's arms and communicated a thrill to his own frame.

"You now see, sir," said she, quickly, "that I did well to warn you against accepting her invitation to Rede Hall!"

"It was more than I deserved that you should concern yourself with me and my folly!"

"Nay, sir, if 'twas a folly, I understand that you felt bound, in the exercise of your duty, to commit it. But now that you have learnt so much of their secrets as you have done to-night, I greatly fear they will make a strong effort to make your knowledge of no avail. It was with that fear in my mind I did suggest we should go by a less direct way than the one by which we came. You must now, sir, take that path to the left, and get down to the marsh, which we must cross on the way to the shore. Where will your boat be in waiting for you?"

"Down in a little creek near the cliff's end. But I will not let you accompany me so far. I am but endangering your safety. Let me descend when we reach the foot of this hill. Trust me, I shall be able to reach the shore

without encountering the 'free-traders.' And for your kindness I can never sufficiently thank you."

"If you must thank me, sir, I must do something to merit your thanks: I must see you in safety on your own element," replied Joan, lightly.

"What! And then return alone to Hurst? Nay, indeed, Miss Joan, I'll not suffer that."

"Then, sir, you must pass the night under my father's roof. He will be pleased to have you. He was abroad when I left home, visiting a sick woman. But he will be home again by this, and will, I am sure, receive you with a hearty greeting."

"You are both all goodness, all kindness. I know not how to thank you!"

His voice trembled, and when he had said these words there was silence between them.

Prosaic as their conversation had been since they left the farmhouse, there was an under-current of deep feeling in both their hearts which lent a vivid interest to their commonplace words. To Tregenna there was thrilling, sweetest music in every tone of the voice of

this young girl, who had exposed herself so undauntedly to danger in the determination to save him from the results of his own daring. While to Joan, careful as she was to speak stiffly and even coldly, there was a secret delight in the knowledge of the real peril from which she had saved her handsome companion.

He was, however, loth to accept her invitation to stay at the Parsonage, fearing that he might, by so doing, bring the vengeance of the smugglers on the heads of both father and daughter. She made light of this fear; but finally, at her urgent entreaties, he agreed to go home with her in the first place, and to take Parson Langney's advice as to going further that night or not.

Hardly had this been settled between the two young people, when the horse they rode pricked up his ears, rousing the attention of his riders.

They had now left the open fields, and were passing through a wild bit of country where knots of trees, well-grown hedges, and clumps of bramble made it difficult for them to see far in any direction, and formed, moreover, safe



hiding-places where an enemy might lie in ambush unperceived and unsuspected.

In the distance, before them, a little to the left, lay the marshes, with the white vapour rolling over them from the sea.

Tregenna reined in the horse to reconnoitre. Trees on the right, a hedge on the left of the miry road. Not a living creature to be seen. In the copse, however, there was a rustling and crackling to be heard, which might be the result of the night-wind, or might not.

"Let us draw back," said Joan, in a whisper, "and go straight down to the marsh and up to Hurst that way!"

Tregenna assented, and was in the very act of turning the horse, when there was a shout, a hoarse cry, and a man sprang out from the copse: the next moment the lieutenant's bridle was seized by Ben the Blast, who was no horseman, and who chose, therefore, to do his part of the work on foot. At the very moment, however, that he sprang out from his ambush, a couple of horsemen appeared, the one behind, the other in front of Tregenna; while a third, galloping up the road, joined his comrades,


and, presenting a pistol at the lieutenant, shouted to his comrades to shoot him down.

The new-comer was Jack Price, whose tears and maudlin protests at the farmhouse had excited the derision of his comrades.

"Hold your hands!" shouted Tregenna back. "Do you not see whom I have with me? There is none here, I am very sure, would harm Parson Langney's daughter?"

"Nay," cried out one of the horsemen, whom, by the voice, Tregenna knew to be Tom; "we'll not harm her. But thou shalt not shelter thyself behind a woman's petticoats!"

But before he could finish his speech Tregenna had deftly disengaged himself from the clasp of Joan's arms, and springing to the ground, struck Ben the Blast such a violent blow with the muzzle of one of his pistols that that burly ruffian released his hold on the horse's bridle. Then, before any one had time to stop him, or even to realize his intention, Tregenna thrust the reins into Joan's hands, and bidding her "Hold on! Ride on quickly!" gave the horse a smart cut which



sent him galloping forward clear away from the throng.

Then, springing to the side of the road, he put his back against a tree, drew his cutlass, and prepared to make the best defence he could.

Jack Price, with a fearful oath, rode at him, but missed his aim with the knife he held, and narrowly escaped being dismounted, as the horse swerved on nearing the tree. Robin Cursemother, who was one of the mounted ones, took warning by this, and swung himself off his horse.

In truth, none of them were more efficient as horsemen than kegs of their own contraband spirits would have been ; and Gardener Tom, who kept his saddle on account of his lameness, contented himself with a passive share in the business, by standing in the road with his pistol cocked, waiting for a chance of aiming at Tregenna without risking the maiming of his own comrades.

Meantime, however, Robin had attacked the lieutenant fiercely in front, while little mean-faced Bill Plunder, creeping through the brushwood, struck at him from behind.

Tregenna, thus attacked by the two, defended himself with vigour, and had dealt an effective blow at Bill's shoulder, when a strange diversion occurred.

There was the sound of a galloping horse's hoofs, of the splashing and churning up of the mud and water in the road. The next moment Joan's horse dashed into the midst of the group, causing the animal Jack Price rode to start off at a smart pace; and Joan herself, alighting in the very midst of the fray, made straight for Tregenna, heedless of the knives and pistols with which the smugglers were armed, and of the vile curses which assailed her ears.

"Go back, go back!" cried he.

"I'll not go back!" retorted Joan, as she still came on, and daringly thrust aside the arm of Jack Price, who had by this time dismounted in his turn. "I'll not see you murdered before my eyes. If they will kill you, they shall kill me too!"

And she sprang through the group and reached Tregenna, while the smugglers, for the moment disconcerted, hung back and looked at her.

"And you, Tom, I'm amazed to see you taking part in an attack like this, half a dozen men against one! Oh, shame on you, shame!" cried she.

Robin Cursemother recovered from his discomfiture before the others.

"'Tis easy to talk!" said he, roughly. "We mean no harm to you, mistress, but we have accounts to settle with this fellow, and that to-night. If so be he's your friend, you should have taught him better manners than to interfere with us. So now, mistress, off with you, and leave him to us!"

But for answer Joan crept a step nearer to Tregenna, who touched her arm gently.

"Go, Miss Joan, go," said he, earnestly. "I can hold my own with these fellows, believe me!"

"Curse you! You shall not bear that boast away with you," said Robin, fiercely.

And he made a lunge at Tregenna.

Joan uttered a faint cry as she caught sight of the gleaming knife in the smuggler's hand, turned quickly, and flung her arms round Tregenna's neck.

"Off with you, away with you! We'll not touch you, mistress, but you must leave him to us!" cried Gardener Tom, reining in his horse behind the pair, and seizing Joan's mount by the bridle.

"Touch him if you dare!" cried Joan, fiercely, as she turned her head, panting, and looked full in Tom's face.

"Why, what call have you to tell us to let him go, mistress? He's a stranger, he is, and naught to you!"

"Oons, mistress, if so be you can make out he's aught to you, we'll let him go!" roared Ben the Blast, in his thick, hoarse voice, which seemed to carry whiffs of sea-fog wherever he went. "Come, now, what is he to thee?"

For one moment Joan hesitated, while Tregenna in vain tried to disengage her arms, and whispered to her to go, to leave him. But she would pay no heed to his protests. In answer to Ben, her voice, after a moment's pause, rang out clearly—

"You will let him go, you say, if I tell you what he is to me? Well, then, you must let

him go. For I tell you—he's—he's the man I love!"

For a moment there fell a silence upon the rough men. There was something in the tones of the maidenly voice which reached even the hearts of the smugglers, and awed them for an instant into quietness. The horses stamped, splashing up the mud; the wind whistled in the trees; but the men, for the space of a few seconds, were still as mice.

Then Tom, the most easily moved, the least hardened amongst them, leaned down from his horse, and touched Tregenna, not ungently, on the shoulder—

"Off with you then, master, and get out of sight and out of hearing before we change our minds!" said he, in a low and somewhat mocking voice.

Tregenna took the hint. Lifting Joan on to the saddle of her father's horse, he swung himself into it in a twinkling, and digging his heels into the animal's flanks, urged him forward without a moment's delay, in the direction of Hurst.

There was an outbreak of oaths and curses,

bloodcurdling to hear. And a pistol was discharged after them, without, however, doing any harm.

But luckily for the lieutenant and the lady, this incident had already bred a quarrel among the smugglers; and before the fugitives were out of earshot, they heard the unmistakable sounds of a conflict which kept the "free-traders" occupied until Hurst was reached by the parson's horse and his riders.

Then, slackening his pace when they entered the straggling village street, Tregenna, whose heart was full, turned so that he might catch a glimpse of the face of his companion. They had ridden thus far in complete silence.

"What shall I say to you?" whispered he, in a vibrating voice, as he bent his head to be near hers.

But the answer came back cold and clear, with a light laugh that chilled him to the soul:

"What shall you say? You had best say nothing, sir. I said what I did say but to save your life!"



## CHAPTER XV.

### THE SMUGGLERS' SHIP.

TREGENNA must have been harder than stone if he had not been stirred to the depths of his being by the courage and devotion shown on his behalf by the parson's beautiful daughter.

From the first moment of meeting her, when he had seen her winsome face and sparkling eyes in the moonlight, on board his own vessel, he had been struck with admiration for her person, her modest, unaffected manners, her spirit, and her devotion. This feeling had grown with every meeting. So it was not wonderful that, on this evening, when she had braved such perils on his behalf, Joan should have inspired him with a passion exalted on the one hand, strong on the other, such as he had never believed it possible that he could feel for any woman.

All the greater, therefore, was his mortification, his sudden revulsion of feeling to despair, when she replied to his stammering attempt at thanks with mocking words, and a chilling laugh.

It was some minutes before he recovered himself sufficiently to speak. By that time they had reached the lane that led from the end of the village street up to the Parsonage. As soon as the glimmering light in the ivied window caught his eye, he said, in a tone which he tried to make as indifferent as her own, but in which it was easy to detect traces of the emotion from which he was suffering—

“You will not suffer me to thank you for your goodness on my behalf. I trust your father may be more complaisant.”

“My father, sir, will make as much light of it as I do,” replied Joan, as she relaxed her hold on her companion’s belt, and alighted in the mud of the lane.

Parson Langney’s voice, hearty, cheery, but not without a touch of anxiety, rang out pleasantly, at this moment, upon their ears.

“Hey, Miss Madcap, is’t you? By what

Nance told me, I had begun to fear your wild expedition had turned out ill!"

"Nay, father, it has turned out very well!" cried she; "for I have carried off Mr. Tregenna from those that would have harmed him, and have thereby made him vastly civil!"

"Nay, sir, Miss Joan will not suffer my civility or my gratitude. She, who is so proud herself, will not allow me to acquit my own debt to her even by a word of thanks."

"Tut-tut, there is no need!" said the parson.

"And the less, sir," put in Joan, quickly, "since I own I had some hand in bringing about your discomfiture before, at the hands of the—h'm—'free-traders.' Father," she went on quickly, turning to the vicar, "I'll never do aught for Ann or her friends again! 'Twas she put them on our track; and they had a mind to murder Mr. Tregenna, I verily believe!"


She was speaking very quickly, with a certain frivolous air which was new in her, and less becoming than her usual straightforward simplicity. Tregenna, who was too inexperienced

in the ways of women to understand the cause of this change in her, was hurt and grieved by it. He could not understand how strong her anxiety must be to try to efface from his mind the remembrance of her action in so boldly declaring to the smugglers that it was for love she protected him.

Chagrined on the one hand, yet still shaken to the very depths by the adoration he felt for the beautiful girl whose touch he seemed still to feel on his breast, Tregenna stammered out again some hesitating words of thanks, as he held out his hand to Parson Langney, with a shy sidelong glance at his daughter.

"I must hasten back to my ship," said he. "And in the morning I shall hope to pay my respects to you, and to induce Miss Joan to give me a better hearing than she will grant to-night."

At these words, Joan, who had been moving restlessly from the horse to her father and back again, apparently unable to keep still one moment now that the tension of the evening's events was over, became suddenly as motionless as a statue. Then, in a voice which was as



earnest as a moment before it had been affectedly gay, she said quickly—

“Father, bid Mr. Tregenna stay here till the morning. These fellows may still be on the watch for him.”

“Sh—sh!” said her father, raising his hand to enforce silence.

In the pause which followed, both Joan and Tregenna were aware of a loud, rumbling noise in the village street below, coming gradually nearer. And in a few minutes, during which they all stood silent and wondering, without exchanging a word, they perceived a huge black mass, dim, shadowy, like some mammoth beast whose bulk makes rapid motion impossible, creeping slowly by in the obscurity of the trees at the bottom of the hill.

Slow, phantom-like, it crept along, with no sound but the rumbling and creaking that had at first arrested the vicar's attention.


Tregenna, on the alert at once, would have descended the hill to find out what the monster was. But at a sign from his daughter, Parson Langney laid a restraining hand upon the young man's arm.

“What can you do—alone?” said he, warningly. “Keep your heart in your breast for to-night, at least. In the morning—why, you must do your duty. Come, a tankard will do you no harm. You shall drink ‘confusion to free-traders’ if you will. And, egad, I’m inclined, after what I’ve heard, to drink the same toast myself!”

Tregenna agreed, anxious for another chance of a word with Joan. But he saw no more of her that night. Even while the vicar was giving this invitation, his daughter had slipped quietly into the house, and disappeared for the night.

This left Tregenna free to tell his host, over the nut-brown ale which the vicar poured out with loving hands, the whole story of the adventures of the evening. Astounded, enthralled, marvelling at his daughter’s courage, and furious at the smugglers’ daring outrage, the vicar listened with all his ears.

And when the young man’s tone grew lower, his eyes more passionate, as he declared his love and admiration for the girl who had risked so much for him, Parson Langney listened



sympathetically, and with tears in his eyes, to the tale he had often indeed heard before, but never from such eager lips.

"Ay, ay, she's a good girl, a good girl, my bonnie Joan!" said he, in a tremulous voice, when Tregenna paused. "You're not the first that has come to me with this tale, sir, though you're the first she's shown such kindness to as she's shown to you. But reckon not too much on that, I warn you. She's not your ordinary lass, that minces and mouths, like the girls at Hurst Court we're going to dine with to-morrow." Tregenna made a mental note of this fact, and determined that he would be invited too. "And what she did and what she said she'd have done and said for any other man in such a plight as yours, I doubt not! But we'll see, we'll see. I'm in no hurry to lose my Joan, I promise you, sir. The day must come when she'll go forth from me as a bride; but there's time enough for that, time enough for that! And I would not have you hope too much, though I do not bid you despair."

Tregenna was forced to be content with this vague encouragement, and with the comfort of

having unburdened his heart to a sympathetic ear. It was not long before he took his leave, and having followed the vicar's advice to concern himself for that night with nothing but his own safety, reached the boat in the creek without accident, and was soon on board the *Sea-Gull*.

Next morning he was early astir. He had already, on arriving on board, sent a trusty messenger to Rye, to beg the brigadier to lose no time in making a second expedition against Rede Hall ; he promised to meet him there, and to put him in possession of some facts he had learnt concerning its hiding-places.

But although it was no later than nine o'clock in the morning when he and General Hambledon met at the farmyard gates, they found that the smugglers had been beforehand with them.

Not a man or a woman was to be found on the premises ; not a cow or a horse ; not a pig or a hen. And though the trap-door to the cellar had been flung wide to assist them in their search, it was in vain they sought for the bales among which Tregenna had stood on the previous night.

Not a keg or a bale was there in the whole



place, though they searched it from garret to cellar!

The brigadier was ferociously facetious, tauntingly jocose.

"Hey-day, Tregenna, I fear they gave thee too much of their contraband *aqua vitæ*, and that it has bred visions in thy brain!" said he, with an ugly smile on his red face, and a vicious look in his eyes. He was in no very good humour with the young man for having outrun himself in zeal, and was at heart rather pleased that this expedition, designed by his rival, should have been as complete a failure as the last.

"Well, at any rate, you see, General, that there was something wrong with the place, for them all to have deserted it like this," said the lieutenant, reasonably enough.

"More like they have deserted it from fear of quarter-day!" retorted the brigadier. "'Tis a common thing enough, a flitting like to this, at such seasons!"

"At least," said Tregenna, who was hot and furious at this fresh rebuff, "you will find the ship under the barn-floor!"


But even as he uttered the words, a chill

seized him as he remembered, in a fresh light, a mysterious incident of the previous evening. He was, therefore, more disgusted than surprised when, in searching the barn, the soldiers discovered that the flooring was indeed loose, as he had said, and that there was a crypt beneath : but that though there were traces of the cradle in which the smugglers' boat had been hauled up and down, and some tools lying about in dark corners with logs and screws, ropes and mallets, the vessel itself had disappeared.

Tregenna took almost in silence the taunts with which the brigadier now saluted him. Leaving the soldiers to return to Rye, the young man, with a shrewd suspicion that the mammoth beast he had dimly seen crawling through the village in the dark on the previous evening was the smugglers' boat, resolved to try to track it to its new resting-place.

Such a weighty thing as the unfinished vessel, and the waggon or waggons on which it must have been removed, could not, he argued, but have left its mark on the roads it traversed.

And so it proved. Following the deep wheelmarks which were easily discernible even



now in the mire of the Hurst road, he arrived at that village, went through it, still tracing the wheelmarks ; and finally, to his consternation, tracked the waggons to the stables of Hurst Court.

It was a disconcerting discovery enough, but Tregenna, furious at the conspiracy thus formed against the representatives of law and order, did not scruple to follow it up. It was evident that the hiding-place they had found for their vessel had been looked upon by the smugglers as safe and sacred, for no steps had been taken to guard it. Tregenna opened the wide door of the coach-house ; and inside, as he had expected, he saw the hull of the unfinished boat.

Without a moment's loss of time he went straight up to the house, where he fancied that the butler who admitted him looked at him askance, as if with some suspicion of his errand.


The squire himself, however, while affecting the greatest astonishment and indignation on hearing that the smugglers' boat had been placed in his stables, was evidently in a state of extreme trepidation as to the course Tregenna meant to pursue with regard to himself.

The lieutenant, however, thought it better to receive his assurances of innocence as if he believed them, thinking that this would be a lesson strong enough to cure the squire of complicity with the smugglers.

Squire Waldron was, of course, particularly civil to his unwelcome guest, pressing him to stay to dinner; an invitation which Tregenna accepted at once, in the hope of meeting Joan.

Then the squire made haste to rid himself of his guest by presenting him to the ladies in the music-room, who again, as on a previous occasion, loaded him with hypocritical expressions of horror at the smugglers and their conduct. Certain rumours of the adventures of the previous evening had reached their ears from the Parsonage, and they all endeavoured to worm out of Tregenna the exact details of his visit to Rede Hall, and of Joan's late ride.

"They do say, you must know, dear Mr. Tregenna," lisped one young lady, with a prim little ghost of a malicious smile, "that Joan Langney was so afraid you were gone to make love to Ann Price, who is reckoned a great beauty in these parts (though I'm sure I ha'n't



a notion why), that she cantered after you on horseback!"

"The forward thing!" cried Miss Lucy.

"But maybe 'tis not true!" said Mrs. Waldron, inquisitively.

"Do, pray, tell us how 'twas, sir," went on Miss Alatheia, playing affectedly with her fan. "'Tis no breach of confidence; for you and she were seen to return to the Parsonage together, late in the evening. So 'twill make the best of a bad business to let us know the circumstances!"

"A bad business!" echoed Tregenna, hotly. "Nay, madam, 'twas a very good business for me! Since, if Miss Joan had not been good enough, knowing I was going thither, to ride to Rede Hall and release me from what was practically imprisonment at the hands of the scoundrels who infest that place, I should scarce have got hither alive!"


The young ladies both went off into a series of little twittering shrieks, raising their hands and turning up their eyes towards the painted ceiling, with every mild expression of horror and affright.

"So she *knew* you was going thither!" chirped Miss Lucy, presently. "You are great friends at the Parsonage then, Mr. Tregenna?"

"I hope I am, madam," returned Tregenna, promptly. "For there's no friendship in the world I value more than that of Miss Joan and her father."

This prompt declaration seemed rather to damp the spirits of the two little pink-eyed girls, and they desisted from their attacks in this direction ; and, having obtained his assurance that music was his passion, they proceeded to the harpsichord, and warbled monotonous little duets to him until the arrival of Parson Langney and his daughter brought a welcome relief from the infliction.

Poor Tregenna, however, rather regretted that he had been so prompt in accepting the squire's invitation, when he found how very frigid Miss Joan was to him. She made him a stately curtsy, with her eyelids lowered, and without taking any notice of his proffered hand. And when the parson, who had heard already of the doings of the morning, twitted Tregenna



about the escape of the smugglers, Joan joined heartily in his ironical comments, while the squire was not long in adding his taunts ; so that the young man found himself assailed on all sides, with no ally save the chirruping young Waldron ladies, whose advocacy irritated him more than did the attacks of Joan.

So mortified was he, indeed, that when the ladies withdrew from the table, he felt that he could not bear the society of the other three gentlemen—his host, Bertram Waldron, and the parson—any longer. He therefore made the excuse of his duties calling him away, and left them to their wine.

Just as he was taking his three-cornered hat from the peg in the hall where it hung, he caught sight of one of the maids of the house, in her smart frilled cap and neat muslin kerchief and apron, in a corner of the hall. On seeing him she started and turned to go back, and this action arrested his attention, and caused him to look at her again.

The first look made him start ; the second made him stare ; the third caused him to run lightly across the hall, and to seize her by the

apron as she tried to escape into one of the rooms.

“Ann Price—masquerading as a housemaid, by all that’s audacious!” cried he, as they came face to face.



## CHAPTER XVI.

### A TRAITRESS.

FINDING escape impossible, Ann turned and put a bold face on the matter. Or rather, she turned indeed, and faced him, but with the same air of modest womanliness which he had before remarked in her when she wore her sex's clothes—a manner which altered so completely as soon as she assumed the costume of “Jem Bax.”

“And what are you pleased to want with me, sir?” she asked respectfully, after the short silence which had followed Tregenna's exclamation.

“Well, I want to know, in the first place, what you are doing here?”

“Sure, sir, there's no harm in my taking a place as housemaid, now I'm turned out of my mother's home by your prying of last night.”

"'Tis rather a bad thing for the squire and his lady," said Tregenna, dryly, "to be harbouring any of your kin, Ann, more especially after my discovery in the coach-house this morning!"

"I am not here, sir, as a smuggler, but as a homeless farmer's daughter," returned Ann, in the same modest, even tone. "I believe I am reckoned worth my salt with a broom in my hand, as well as in the dairy."

"Nay, nay, 'tis not for your services with mop and churn they take you in, Ann, I know that," said Tregenna. "You would have done best to keep out of my way a few days, after your doings of last night. 'Tis not your fault your rascally crew did not make an end to me, when you sent them in pursuit of me, as you did!"

"Nay, sir, if I did," answered Ann, with a sudden change to a soft voice and a pleading manner, which had in it something strangely attractive, by reason of its unexpectedness, "'twas done in the heat of unreasoning passion, and without a thought of what grave consequences it might bring upon you. If they had

really harmed you, by my troth I would never have spoke to one of them again."

"A very fair explanation, to be sure!" said Tregenna, dryly. "But 'twas well I had the luck to meet with a woman more womanly, to counteract the effects of your solicitude on my account."

"You mean Miss Joan," said Ann, in a very quiet tone, as she played with the corner of her apron, keeping her eyes fixed upon it all the time.

"Whom should I mean but that most sweet woman?" cried Tregenna, with the more enthusiasm that Ann was evidently displeased by his praise of the lady. "Had it not been for her goodness, I should most surely have been murdered last night, either by you or some one of your villainous confederates."

"Nay, nay, sir, you would not," returned Ann, earnestly. "They would not have dared, I say, not one of them, to do a hurt to one in whom—in whom"—her voice faltered a little, and she looked down, bending her head, so that he could not see her face—"in whom I had an interest!"

"An interest! Ay, truly, an interest so strong that, at first sight of me, you did show it at once by presenting a pistol at my head!"

Ann suddenly raised her head, and looked into his face with a steadfast earnestness which could not but arrest his attention. In her grey eyes there was a strange light, in her whole manner a softness, both new and surprising. Even her voice seemed to have lost every trace of robust peasant harshness, and to have become tender and melting.

"Sir, sir, you don't understand! How can I make you understand?" cried she passionately.

Then, as he looked into her face with astonishment and curiosity, she suddenly turned, walked a few steps towards a door in the darkest part of the hall, and beckoned him to follow her.

"Come hither, sir, out into the air!" said she, in a low voice. "I am stifling here; I want to feel the fresh wind on my face while I speak."

Her voice was full of strong emotion. Tre-genna paused an instant, suspecting treachery in the strange woman; but she divined the

cause of his hesitation, and with a sudden change to fire and pride, she said—

“You need not fear me. See, there is no ambush prepared for you!” And as she spoke, she threw open the door, and showed the way into the beautiful old garden behind the house.

Tregenna followed her in silence as she went out, and took, without looking behind her, the path that led, through winding walks, and between quaint, stiff yew hedges, to the Italian garden. There a broad terrace, with a stone balustrade, led down to bright beds of late autumn flowers, still pretty and fragrant, though they were growing tall and straggling at this late season, and were, in places, nipped with the early frosts of the coming winter.

Ann stopped on the terrace, and waited for Tregenna to come up to her. When he did so, she turned abruptly, and he was surprised to see that she was in tears.

The discovery, in a woman of her fierce attributes, was startling, amazing; and Tregenna was disconcerted by it.

“You are astonished, I see, sir,” she began, in the same gentle voice that he had last heard

from her, "to see a creature you have always looked upon as masculine and hard, with aught so feminine as a tear upon her face!"

"Well, Miss Ann, I confess it, I am surprised. I thought you were made of stuff too stern for such weakness!"

"Did you but know more of me," said she, sadly, "you would not think so. We are all, as you know, sir, made by our surroundings; and see what mine have been! Brought up from my earliest childhood among rough folk, hearing of scenes that 'twould make your blood run cold to relate, what chance had I to grow into your soft and tender woman, that sits and smiles, and screams at sight of a spider?"

"But surely there's a wide difference between screaming at a spider, on the one hand, and using the weapons, ay, and the oaths of a man, on the other?"

At this reproach, Ann became suddenly red, and hung her head as if in shame.

"Nay, sir, 'tis true," said she, almost below her breath, "and I am shocked myself, when I have leisure to reflect on't, at the work I do, and the words I utter, when my kinsmen have

stirred me up to fight their battles and to do the deeds they demand of me!"

"Nay, 'tis, I think, rather they that do the deeds you command. Jem Bax has the name of being a leader on these occasions, and indeed your own words have confirmed this!"

"'Tis true I have thrown in my lot with them, hating myself the while; but 'tis not true, sir, to say I have had aught but misery and wretchedness in the doing of these deeds. Does not your fine lady friend Miss Joan speak well of me? Come, now, has she spoke never a good word for me, in the discussions I doubt not you have had on these matters?"

"Yes, she says you can be kind and womanly, when you please; that you are good to the poor and the sick; and that she has a kind of liking for you, besides that she feels for you as the daughter of one whom she remembers tender to her in her childhood."


Ann's mobile face had grown, as she listened to this speech, as happy and soft as a child's.

"Ay, sir," said she, "and 'tis the real Ann of whom she speaks, the natural woman that I would fain always be!"

"Give up your dealings with these folk, then," said Tregenna, eagerly, as he sat on the balustrade, and looked at her with earnest eyes. "Listen to the promptings of your better nature, and in yielding to your own good instincts you will be helping not only yourself, but your kinsfolk out of harm! Remember, you cannot fight for ever such forces as will be brought against you and your lawless traffic. Yield then while there is a grace in yielding, and wait not for the strong hand of the law to get hold of you, and to mow you down!"

While he spoke, with fire and excitement, moved by her emotion and deeply interested in the wayward woman, Ann had drawn gradually nearer to him, until her strong hand touched his as it lay on the balustrade. Her eyes, still soft and dewy with tears, sought his for an instant from time to time, as if in shyness, all the more attractive from her reputed character for fierce disdain.

When he ceased speaking, she sighed deeply, and then seemed to become suddenly possessed by a spirit of daring and desperation.





Drawing herself up, and peering closely into his handsome face, she said quickly—

“Sir, sir, you know not how you move me! I have never felt before as I feel in listening to you. You make me hate my own folk, with their villainies and their rough ways, kinswoman and confederate of theirs though I have been! Oh, sir, I feel, I know, that you are better than we, that we are but the nest of robbers and pirates you say, that we deserve no mercy at your hands!”

Passionate, earnest as she was, Tregenna kept his head sufficiently to be sceptical about this sudden appearance of conversion.

He drew back, almost imperceptibly, a little way, and said, in a cooler tone—

“And I fear 'tis little mercy some of you will get, when a stronger force is sent down to ferret your leaders out!”

“But you would make distinctions, sir, would you not?” said she, with tremulous eagerness. “You would not, for sure, deal with the lad Tom, poor Tom that you have lamed for life, as hardly as with some others?”

“Those that have done the worst will be

the most harshly dealt with, certainly," said Tregenna.

"Ay, and none too harshly either, for some of them! villains, thieves, plunderers that they be! See here, sir"—and her tone dropped again to a whisper, as she came quite close to him, and laid one hand almost caressingly on his sleeve—"there's no sympathy in my heart for them that would have done you harm, no, nor for the man that murdered that poor coast-guardsmen when first you came hither! I love not such folks, sir, whatever you may think of me! And see, sir, to prove to you how earnestly I do grieve for the ill they have done, I am ready to give you up the murderer of the coastguardsmen into your hand, ay, for I know who 'twas that did it, and I can put you in the way of evidence to prove it too!"

Tregenna started and flushed. He had not the least doubt that this woman could indeed do as she offered to do, that she could deliver the murderer into the hands of justice. But he shrank from accepting her suggestion, not only with instinctive mistrust of a woman who was ready to deliver up her own lover, but with

not unnatural suspicion that she might be a traitress to both sides.

So he got off the balustrade, and said coldly—

“I thank you, Mistress, for your offer : but I believe the hands of justice will need no more aid than they have got!”

Then Ann, without any appearance of ill-feeling, laughed softly.

“Maybe the hands of justice are less powerful than you think, sir,” said she. “But, at any rate, I hope you will think kindly of the woman who, for your sake, was ready to risk her safety, nay, her life maybe, to help you!”

As she spoke, in a tone of inexpressible tenderness, she came very near to the young lieutenant, and gazed into his face with a look so melting, so passionate, that he was stirred, fascinated, in a very high degree. It was impossible to be cold to her, however great his innermost disapproval of her might be. He had bent his head to reply, when a footstep on the gravel behind the yew-hedge, followed by a loud outburst of laughter, caused him to start, and to look round.

Peering at the pair through a gap in the

hedge he saw the face of young Bertram Waldron, flushed with wine, twisted into malevolent contortions of coarse amusement.

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed the young cub, "here's sport, egad! I'll wager she gives you a smack o' the face before she's done, like to the one she gave me but this morning!"

Tregenna made but one step in his direction when Bertram prudently retired; and they heard his cracked laugh as he went rapidly back to the house.

It was some moments before Tregenna and Ann could resume their interrupted conversation. Indeed, Tregenna was anxious to break it off altogether, but Ann persisted, following him as he turned to move away, and detaining him with a gesture which was half peremptory, half imploring.

"Nay, nay, sir, you'll give me a hearing, at least," said she, earnestly, "if 'twere but for the safety of your friends. And I could tell you of a plot that's been formed whereby your crew would be the sufferers, to an extent would rend your heart. Ay, 'tis true!" she added, as he turned incredulously towards her.

"There's little need of a special plot," said he, "since we all know the whole neighbourhood's in league against us!"

"And for that reason you should be all the more willing to lend your ear, when you have at last found a friend ready to afford you assistance!" persisted Ann. "And better assistance than your Miss Joan could give, I'll warrant me!"

Just as she spoke these words, in a tone which betrayed some pique, Tregenna raised his head on hearing the sound of a rustling silken gown on the walk above: and there, between the hedges, with the malicious face of Bertram Waldron appearing behind her, he saw Joan Langney herself, with a look of proud astonishment on her beautiful face.

The mischievous young man had brought her out into the garden on some pretext, evidently; for it was plain she had not expected to see either Tregenna or Ann. :

The moment he caught sight of her, Tregenna made a hasty excuse to Ann, and mounting the stone steps from the terrace in a couple of strides, addressed Joan just as she was in the act of turning away.

"Miss Joan, a moment, I beg!" said he.

Bertram giggled; but on Tregenna's turning sharply to him with a gesture of angry dismissal, the cub retreated, and, with a clumsy air of being at his ease, retired quickly to the house. Ann also, with a short, hard laugh, disappeared among the yew-hedges.

Thus left alone with the girl he loved, the young lieutenant was not slow in seizing the opportunity he had so long wished for; and although she tried to leave him and to return to the house, he gave her a look so full of entreaty, as he mutely placed himself in her way, and gazed at her with an expression there was no mistaking, that she faltered, paused, and asked, in a low voice—

"What have you, sir, to say to me? I had no notion of meeting you here."

"Surely, Miss Joan, if you could give ten minutes of your conversation to that booby young Waldron, you might bestow the same favour on me!"

"'Twas from no liking for Mr. Waldron I came out," said Joan, hastily. "He lured me hither by saying I should see something very

interesting in the Italian garden ; and I thought he had some rare flower or bird to show me. I should scarce have come, as you may guess, to see you in such interesting converse with Ann Price ! ”

In her voice, Tregenna was delighted to notice a tone of pique which seemed to be of good augury.

“ There was naught of great import in my talk with her,” said he, quickly. He was trembling so much that his sword rattled at his side, and his voice was as hoarse as a raven’s. “ But ’tis true I have something of great import to me on my mind, and I cannot but think, Miss Joan, you must know what it is ! ”

“ Indeed, sir, I cannot guess your thoughts ! ” said Joan, though the heightened colour in her cheeks belied her words.

“ Can you not imagine what I feel—what I could not—dared not, say last night ? Oh, you do, you must, I think ! Sure a man cannot feel what I feel for you without its getting from his heart into his eyes ! Don’t you know I love you, Joan ? ”

The change came about in the space of a

second. When the last hurried words, husky, tremulous, half whispered, came bursting from his lips, Joan shivered, gave him one glance, and had betrayed herself before she was aware.

"You—you care for Ann!" she faltered, between two long-drawn breaths.


"Pshaw! Not I! I care for Joan. I care for Joan, only Joan!"

And at the last word, as she hardly resisted him, he kissed her.

It was growing cold even in the sheltered garden, now that the late autumn sun was descending in the sky, and the wind was rising and sending the red leaves fluttering from the boughs of the trees to the earth. But they never heeded it: they would have gone on sitting on that terrace, and walking round and round those flower-beds, for an hour and more, had not Parson Langney's voice presently startled them by calling—

"Joan, Joan, my lass, where art thou?"

The girl gave one frightened glance at her lover, forbade him to follow her and speak to her father till she had prepared the way, and fled away like an arrow from a bow.





Happy and excited with the joy of successful love, Tregenna was sauntering round the house towards a side-gate out of the park, when Ann's voice startled him.

He knew not whence she had sprung ; but she was looking at him from out a clump of bushes with a strange smile on her pallid face.

As he started, she burst into a low, mocking laugh.

"Ay, sir, kiss while you can ; speak low when there's a fair maid to listen. But the game's not played out yet !"

Upon those words, with a flashing look from her great sombre grey eyes, she disappeared abruptly.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## AN INNOCENT RIVAL.

Now, although Harry Tregenna was in a state of mind more nearly approaching perfect bliss than he had ever been before, with the knowledge that Joan Langney loved him fresh upon him, he could not but feel an uncanny chill when Ann Price uttered her mocking words of warning.

“The game’s not played out yet!”

He would have followed her, questioned her. But she knew every turn in the park much better than he ; and after a few moments spent in looking for her, he gave up the search as an idle one.

After all, what could she do? Desperate and vindictive as he knew her to be, she could hardly go the length of trying to harm generous-hearted Joan. And as for what she might

choose to attempt on his own person, Tregenna was ready to take the risks of war, which, indeed, could hardly be greater in the future than they had been in the past.

So he presently dismissed all thought of her, and gave himself up, heart and soul, to joyful thoughts of the beautiful, brave girl he had won. He lingered about for a little while, to give her time to break the news to her father, as she had herself wished to do. And when he thought they must have reached home, he turned his steps also in the direction of the Parsonage.

By the wistful look of emotion on Parson Langney's rugged, kindly face, by the moisture in his eyes, the young man guessed that he had already been made aware that he was threatened with the loss of his fair daughter : and the first words he uttered, as he held out a shaking hand in welcome, confirmed this impression :

"So you're going to take her away from me ! Well, well, 'tis the way of all flesh !"


Tregenna assured him that they were in no hurry, that he was ready to wait any reasonable

time : a week, a month, any period they might choose. He further assured the vicar that he would leave the service, and promised to settle down with his wife at no very great distance from Hurst Parsonage.

And although Parson Langney shook his head very lugubriously, and grumbled at the folly of a woman's marrying before she was thirty, his jolly face soon grew brighter when Joan came in, and, putting her arms round his neck under her lover's very nose, assured him that he was the nicest and handsomest man in the whole world, and that, if she were driven to get married, it should only be on compulsion, and on receiving her future husband's assurance that she was her father's girl still, and might be with him as much as she liked.

So they had a happy evening together, and when the young lieutenant bade them good night, and started on his way back to his boat, it was with never a thought of smugglers, or wreckers, builders of secret boats, or treacherous farmers' daughters, to damp his spirits.

There was a lull in the contraband traffic after these events, and Tregenna and the



brigadier began to flatter themselves that their energy had at last awed the smugglers into submission, when one day the news was brought to the lieutenant that the same sloop which had been in sight on the occasion of the last raid, was hovering about in the distance.

A sharp look-out was accordingly kept that night, but nothing happened to justify their suspicions. On the following day, however, a light mist sprang up, and not long afterwards they were able to discover that, under cover of it, there was a boat making at a great rate for the beach at Hastings.

The smugglers—for Tregenna had little doubt of the nature of the boat's errand—had a good start of the cutter's men; but the latter gave chase at once in one of their own boats, and were soon justified in their surmise; for, on grounding their craft as soon as they could on the pebbly shore, the occupants of the pursued boat deliberately emptied it of its contents in sight of their pursuers, and leaving it to its fate, ran up the beach towards the narrow streets of the old town, each with a

couple of kegs slung round him, the one in front, and the other behind.

They did not fail, as they went, to bid a graceful adieu to Tregenna and his men, waving their rough knitted caps and shouting "Good-bye" as they disappeared through the openings between the houses.

Straining every nerve, the cutter's men grounded their own boat in an incredibly short time; and, profiting by the precious moments the smugglers had lost in emptying their cargo, they raced up the stony beach in pursuit, believing that, encumbered as they were, the "free-traders" would find it impossible to keep ahead of them long.

But alas! they had reckoned without their host; for while they, the representatives of law and order, were fighting alone and unaided, the smugglers had each a brother or a mother, a sister or a sweetheart, in one or other of the mean, picturesque little hovels that nestled together in the shelter of the tall cliffs beneath the castle, and lined the narrow, tortuous streets of the ancient town.

No sooner had the first of the revenue-men



turned the corner into the High Street, up which the smugglers were making their way towards some chosen haunt of their own, than the hindermost of the rascals, who alone carried no burden, gave a peculiar kind of shrill whistle.

This was evidently the recognized method of giving an alarm to the rest, and was also the signal for the inhabitants of the squalid little houses to be on the alert.

Already every door was standing open, showing, to the exasperation of the king's men, a group of eager, grinning faces, intent on the sport.

The moment the whistle sounded, the smugglers who carried the kegs divested themselves each of one of his burdens, and rolled it towards the nearest open cottage-door. The moment the keg was safe inside, the door closed.

The smuggler, having thus got rid of one of his kegs, went on at a quicker pace for a few steps, and then, on the sounding of a second whistle, got rid of the remaining one in the same way.

Well used to this manoeuvre, which was a common one at the time, those of the cottage-folk who had not received one of the contraband kegs, closed their doors also; so that Tregenna and his men, on reaching the point in the street where this trick had been played, found it impossible to identify any particular house as one of those which had lent the use of its portal to the smugglers.

A few half frightened, half mocking children stood about in the road; but at the windows not a single face was to be seen.

Tregenna, who was at the head of the pursuing force, saw, to his chagrin, that it was now impossible for him to hope to come up with the smugglers. Lightened of their burdens, and already well ahead of their pursuers, they flew like the wind up the steep street towards the old church, without so much as looking behind them to give the cutter's men a chance of seeing and remembering their faces.

At this point in the route, however, they all somewhat abruptly disappeared, with the exception of the one who had given the signal.

From his limping gait, Tregenna had long



since recognized him as "Gardener Tom," and he felt at the first moment rather sorry that this man, the only one of the "free-traders" for whom he felt the slightest kindness, should be the only one to fall into his hands.

It was not until he had reached the queer little irregular group of nestling houses clustering round the church, that Tom suddenly turned, put his back against the steep wall which banked up the houses on one side of the roadway, folded his arms, and waited for Tregenna to come up to him.

The lieutenant, expecting that Tom had a pistol ready for him, put his hand to one of his own. The smuggler, however, shook his head, and held up his hands.

"Where are the rest?" cried Tregenna, more by instinct than because he expected a useful answer.

Tom, whose handsome, open face was flushed with his exertions, smiled mockingly at him.

"Wheer? Wheer?" asked he, with a shake of the head. "Nay, master, look round, and see if 'twill be easy for you to light upon 'em now!"

Tregenna did look round. He saw the close-packed cottages, some prim and neat, with a sort of look about them as if no creature within had ever heard of so terrible a thing as a smuggler: some dirty and neglected, and capable of anything: but all shut up, and without a human face at any window. One mean-looking little alehouse at the corner did certainly bear a sort of rakish, contraband look. But a peep within its doors showed that the landlord and one old man had it, to all appearances, to themselves.

Tregenna sighed, and frowned.

"Well, I must arrest you, Tom, and carry you off at least," said he.

"I be smuggling naught, master!" objected Tom, quite mildly.

"You were signalman to the others," answered Tregenna. "You're one of the gang."

Tom took this very quietly.

"All roight, take me if you will," said he. "'Twas you, sir, that gave me the hurt makes me too lame to get away!" said he.

Tregenna frowned, and looked uneasily round at his own men, who, deeming him quite

able to cope with this, the only one of the ruffians whom they had in their power, had dispersed in various directions, engaged in the rather hopeless task of ferreting out their lost enemies.

"I'd sooner have caught any one of the others, Tom" said Tregenna, "than laid hands on thee."

"And I," replied Tom, with a glance round in his tone, and a lowering of the voice, "I'd sooner I was caught by you, sir, than as any of the others was! For I've summat for to say to you, sir, summat for to arst you!"

And over Tom's open ruddy face there passed an expression of deep anxiety.

"To ask me, Tom? Well?"

"Oons, sir, you'd tell me the truth, wouldn't you? You'd be above telling lies to a poor fellow loike me!" went on the young man, wistfully.

Tregenna looked amazed, as well he might, at this most unexpected speech.

"I hope, Tom," said he, "I'm above telling lies to any one."

"Well, sir, it's loike to this 'ere: you han't

forgot, sir, that noight as you came to Rede Hall, have you?"

"No, I'm not likely to forget that quickly!"

"You'll moind, sir, how 'twas Ann Price sent us after thee, in a passion."

"Ay, I'm not like to forget that either, Tom, nor your treatment of me when you came up with me!"

Tom looked down, reddening.

"Oons, sir," said he, gruffly, "we're rough customers, I know. But we had more than one account to settle with you, sir; and you see, you'd found out a bit too much to be let off loight! We had to turn out of the place where we'd met together for years, all along of you and your findings. And that wasn't all, neither!"

And a significant frown puckered his brows once more.

"Why, what other harm have I done you, than what I had to do in the course of my duty?" asked Tregenna.

"You'd gotten the roight side of Ann!" growled Ann's lover, angrily.

"The right side! Nay, then I know not

what getting the wrong side would be like!" retorted Tregenna, lightly. "For there's no sort of ill treatment, short of actual murder, that I have not received at her hands, and I own I never meet her without watching her hands, to be sure she holds not a knife concealed in some fold of her dress, wherewith to stab me!"

"Ay, that's Ann all over!" said her lover, admiringly. "She's got such a spirit, has Ann! But it's just them ways of hers with you that makes me know she looks upon you with too koin'd an eye, sir. She loikes you, and she hates herself for loiking a king's man, that's what it is!"

"Indeed!" said the young lieutenant, with a laugh. "Then I assure you, Tom, she's vastly welcome to transfer her liking to some one else; for it's wasted on me!"

Tom scanned the speaker's face narrowly, and then drew a long breath of relief.

"You speak as if it was truth," said he, at last, in a muttering tone. "Then, maybe, sir," he went on, with deep earnestness, still keeping an anxious gaze upon Tregenna's

face, "maybe you don't know where she is now?"

He seemed to wait with breathless eagerness for the answer.

"Most surely I do not," replied Tregenna, promptly, "if she be not at Hurst Court, where I saw her near ten days ago."

Tom shook his head.

"She ben't there now, sir. Nobody hereabouts has a notion where she's got to; so I thought as maybe it was you had spirited her away."

"God forbid!" said Tregenna, heartily. "My good fellow, set your mind at rest. If there's one man in the world less likely than another to spirit away your friend Ann Price, or indeed to have aught to do with her, 'gad, 'tis I!"

Tom passed his hand over his chin reflectively: he did not yet seem satisfied.

"Faith, man, what further assurance do you want?" said Tregenna, amused at the fellow's persistency. "Dost still think I'm in love with thy fair friend the amazon?"

"Nay, sir, that I do not," replied Tom,

slowly. "But 'tis her that's in love with thee! And, sure, she's more loike to have her way with thee, than ever thou wouldst ha' been to make way with her, if so be it had been t'other way round!"

"Make yourself easy on that point also," answered Tregenna, now laughing heartily at the young man's fears. "Mistress Ann would get no soft words from me, no loving looks, and no fond embraces, were I the only man left on the earth, and she the only woman!"

"Sir," said Tom, not a bit relieved by the assurance, "I do believe you mean what you say. But she's no common woman, isn't Ann; and since she's sworn she'll have your kisses within the month, why, I do surely believe she'll get them, whether you will or no."

"Sworn to have my kisses!" echoed the lieutenant, in amazement. "Egad, then she'll be forsworn. Fear not, man; thy fair one has no charms for me, and truly she hath never met a man less like to bestow his kisses upon her. Where she is gone I know not: and if I were in thy shoes, I should be thankful she'd

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disappeared, and I should look about for something softer, something more like a woman, to whom to give my kindness!"

"Sir, one cannot give love where one will!" said poor Tom, rather ruefully. "If I do know why I love her, 'tis on account of her not being loike to every other lass in the parish; to her being so different from herself, as from all other women, that one never knows how she's going for to be two hours together! So it ain't no good of talking, sir; for, oons! I've loved her too long to go trapesing after another now!"

At that moment Tregenna caught sight of the first of his own men returning from a fruitless search for the rest of the smugglers. He turned quickly to Tom.

"Tom," said he, "I cannot deal harshly with thee; get away with thee ere it be too late. For these fellows of mine dare not show so much leniency as I am doing."

Tom took the hint. He was artful enough to make a feint of striking the lieutenant, making a movement which caused the latter to take an instinctive step backward, as if he had really



been pushed aside. Tom then made a dash for the nearest opening between the houses ; and being still wonderfully active when he chose to exert himself, he was lost to the sight of the cutter's men in a few seconds.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## A PRISONER.

It was useless to pursue the smugglers any longer, and equally useless to make any plans for seizing them on land on their way back to the sloop. As they had friends all along the coast, it was very certain that they would make no attempt to re-embark from the beach at Hastings, but would reach the ship from some other point of the shore.

All that Tregenna could do, therefore, was to seize the boat they had left upon the beach, and then to return to the cutter. Here he learnt that the sloop had sailed away under cover of the mist, so that there was nothing for it but to take their chance of falling in with her crew on their way back to her.

When night came on, therefore, a couple of boats, with Tregenna in one of them, left the



cutter and cruised about, the one on the Hastings side, the other in the direction of the marshes.

Tregenna was in the former boat ; but it had not got very far when one of the men at the oars raised his head, as if listening intently.

"Did you hear that, sir?" asked he, in a low voice.

"What? I heard nothing."

The man rested on his oar, and his example was followed by the others. There was a moment of dead silence, no sound reaching their straining ears but the cry of a sea-bird and the soft splash of the calm water as it lapped the sides of the boat. It was a beautiful night, the sea as smooth as a lake, and the moon, which was almost at the full, making a bright path of silvery yellow on the still water. There was nothing to tell of early winter save for a touch of frost in the air, and a thin line of November fog along the shore.

Suddenly there rang out in the keen night air the sharp report of a pistol, followed by a cry, which sounded shrill in the distance.


"Turn," said Tregenna, "and row hard for the other boat."

As they went, pulling with all their strength, they heard nothing more for some time. It was not until they had come in sight of their second boat that they perceived that a stern chase was in progress.

Well out to sea, and rowing out at a rapid rate, was a long, low craft which was painted a light colour, and which it was easy to guess was the property of the "free-traders." It was much longer than either of the pursuing craft, lightly built, and well manned. So that singly one of the cutter's boats and its small crew would have had little chance with it, had the two come to close quarters.

Nevertheless, the revenue-men were giving chase with a will, and at sight of their comrades on the way to join them they gave forth a cheer which rang out over the water, putting spirit into the heart of their comrades, and vigour into their strokes.

As the answering cheer came forth from the throats of Tregenna and his crew, a shout of hoarse, mocking laughter, mingled with oaths



and foul threats, came in a volley from the smugglers' craft ; and the next moment, finding that the two opposing boats were gaining on her, she swung round and waited for them to come up with her.

Tregenna's boat was now the nearer of the two. In the moonlight the lieutenant saw a face, coarse, evil, with eyes aflame, peering over the side of the smugglers' craft from under one of the knitted caps they most of them wore : it was that of Ben the Blast. The next moment the rascal raised his right arm, and pointed a pistol at him.

The rest of the smugglers were all crouching, like Ben, round the sides of the boat. Suddenly there sprang up above their heads the slighter, more lithe figure, in open jacket and loose shirt-collar, which Tregenna had so much reason to remember. Even at that moment of excitement, the thought that this was a woman who stood exposed to his own fire and that of his men made Tregenna feel for a moment sick and faint. Before he had recovered from the effects of his recognition of Ann Price in the guise of "Jem Bax," he saw

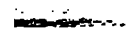

her strike a violent blow at Ben's right arm : and the upraised pistol dropped into the water.

Then there came a cry from the crew of the second cutter's boat ; in the last few moments they had gained on their comrades, and it was they who first came up with the smugglers.

Over Tregenna there had suddenly come a frightful sense of a new and sickening danger, that of killing a woman in open fight. Unsexed creature as she had seemed, when he had heard her cursing and uttering threats against him at the farmhouse, he could not but remember, at this fearful moment, how she had conversed with him in the garden at Hurst Court, with all the sweet tones and soft looks, the pleading words and winning ways, of a very woman.

The feeling was paralyzing ; it went near to making a coward of him. Then, just as his boat was drawing in its turn alongside that of the smugglers, he saw one of his own men, from the other boat, in actual conflict with "Jem."

He saw the gleam of knives ; he saw the two boats rocking like cradles on the surface of the water. Then it was "Jem" who uttered



a cry ; the red blood gushed forth over the white shirt she wore, and the next moment she staggered, and fell, not back into her comrades' boat, but into that of the revenue-men.

At that moment Tregenna's attention was recalled to his own situation by his receiving a blow on the breast from a weapon in the hands of one of the smugglers. The attack recalled him to himself, roused again the savage instinct which is the best for a man to feel at such a time, and nerved his arm to retaliation.

He saw no more of "Jem ;" he was able, therefore, in the excitement of the fight, to forget her. And, although the smugglers' boat presently succeeded in sheering off, after having inflicted some damage on their opponents, it was with more than one of their number hurt and disabled that they made off in the direction of the sloop.

Tregenna would have followed ; but to the signals he made to his second boat to accompany him, the crew replied that they were unable to do so. He had, therefore, to be content with the damage he had undoubtedly inflicted upon the "free-traders," and to return

to the cutter, which he reached some minutes before the second boat did.

When this came up, in its turn, the boatswain, who was in charge of it, saluted, in some triumph, as he drew alongside.

Tregenna was looking over the side, anxious to learn whether his men had suffered much.

"Sir," called out the boatswain, cheerily, "I've good news for you!"

"Well, and what is it?" asked the lieutenant, as he scanned, with some bewilderment, a sort of heap which lay in the bows of the little boat.

"Oons, sir, we've brought a prisoner along," answered the boatswain, in a ringing voice. "And wounded beside. And 'tis none other than Jem Bax, that's long been known as the biggest rascal of the lot!"

Instead of receiving this intelligence with the delight and congratulations which the hero of the capture evidently expected, Tregenna uttered a sound which was very like a groan, and exclaimed, in a most lugubrious voice—

"The devil you have!"

The boatswain, startled and disappointed, looked at his captain in astonishment.

"Plague on't, sir, but I thought I'd done the smartest night's work ever fell to my lot!" cried he.

"Take him back!" roared Tregenna, as soon as he caught the first sight of the white face he had so much reason to remember.

The boatswain had uncovered the heap in the bows, exposing to view the prostrate form of "Jem Bax," who lay, with closed eyes, and with bloodstains on face and breast, limp, motionless, helpless, without giving a sign of life.

Tregenna's face and voice changed at the sight.

"Well, haul him up," said he, with a sudden change to anxiety, as the thought struck him that Ann was perhaps already dead. "We'll see what we can do for the fellow!"

None of the others had, apparently, the least suspicion that "Jem Bax" was a woman; and Tregenna intended to keep the secret to himself if he could, and to get rid of her as fast as possible.

There was something so ridiculous in having caught such a prisoner that he would not for worlds have had the truth suspected.

They raised the still motionless body to the level of the cutter's deck, and Tregenna himself knelt down to examine the injuries of the seemingly unconscious prisoner. The men would have taken her below ; but Tregenna, whose great anxiety was, after seeing to her wounds, to get rid of her as quickly as he could, without discovery of her sex, desired them to leave her where she lay, at any rate for the time, and threw his own cloak over her, while he sought the wound which had reduced her to this condition.

He could find nothing but a superficial cut near the collar-bone, which had indeed bled freely, but scarcely to such an extent, to judge by appearances, as to have produced insensibility. Further examination disclosed a large bruise on the upper part of the right arm ; but this seemed to be the full extent of her injuries.

It was not unnatural that Tregenna, knowing the artful character of the woman, should come to the conclusion that she was shamming sick to some extent, and that her injuries were not alone the cause of this excessive prostration.



He dismissed his men, therefore, and performed for her the same office that had fallen to him before, by producing his flask of *aqua vitæ*, and holding it to her lips.

He did not, however, on this occasion, bestow so much patience or so much tenderness upon her as he had done before. As soon as the men had retired far enough for him not to risk being overheard, he said in her ear—

“Come, Jem, ’tis vastly well done, but ’tis wasted on me this time!”

Very little to his surprise, she opened her eyes immediately, and said, but in a faint, husky voice—

“I did but wait till I could speak with you alone, sir. I am dying—I am bleeding within—I know it, I feel it—But I care not. So I die in your arms, or, at least, with you by me, I care naught : I shall die happy !”

As she spoke, her great, weird grey eyes, unnaturally large in appearance through the drawn expression of her features and the utter absence of colour from her cheeks and lips, were fixed intently upon his face,


Although he reproached himself for the suspicion, Tregenna did at first ask himself whether this speech, moving as it was meant to be, were not part of the deception she had intended throughout to play upon him. But before he could utter a word in answer, she said, looking at him reproachfully the while—

“You doubt me, sir; I can see it in your face! But, tell me, did I not stay the hand of Ben the Blast, when he would have shot you down? Did you not see how I caused his pistol to fall into the water? Wherefore should I have acted so, I, who can fight as well as I can love, but for some feeling for you which was not that of an enemy?”

“’Tis true you saved me from that bullet, and I am grateful, Ann,” said Tregenna. “And I will hope you think too gravely of your own case, and that I may soon be able to send you back on shore. Drink this, drink it, and it will, I hope, put some life into you, some warmth, as it did before!”

The reminder brought a tinge of colour to Ann’s white face.

“Raise my head with your arm then, sir,”



said she, "and I will drink, since 'tis you who bid me!"

She gave him another long look, passionate, earnest, full of a strange, mysterious pain. Then, having sipped the cordial, she drew a long breath, as if its potency were too great for her in her weakened state, and whispered—

"I have something to ask you, sir, before—I—die!" Her voice failed her on the last words, and he had to wait a little before she gained strength enough to go on. "Will you promise that, when the breath has gone out of my body, you will let me lie here, in the open air, and with your cloak over me, till the morning? Nay, sure, sir," she went on feebly, as Tregenna would have spoken, "you can't refuse me so small a boon!"

She clutched at his hand as she spoke, and held it with a convulsive grip, as he answered her.

"You shall stay here, if you please," said he. "But do not give way. You are young, and strong: you will live yet, I doubt not. I can see no wound upon you that should lead to your death!"


"None the less," said she, as she tried to shake her head, "I shall die. And I am glad of it, since my body, in death, shall lie where I would have it lie, in Heaven's sweet air, and on your ship, yours." She pronounced the last word with inexpressible tenderness, and turned upon him, as she spoke, a look so moving, so piercing in its wistfulness, that the tears sprang to Tregenna's eyes.

"Kiss me," said she quickly. "Kiss me, once, kiss me twice, and thrice—before I die!"

As she uttered these words, in a hoarse and broken voice, she strove to raise herself, and lifted her white and eager face to his.

He obeyed her, kissing her three times, not with the feeling that it was a dying woman whose lips touched his, but with a horrible, uncanny sense of contact with some being that was not honest flesh and blood. It seemed to him that her dry lips burned, seared his, as if he had been touched by red-hot coals.

It was with difficulty that he repressed a shudder as she let him go. She fixed upon him her dark grey eyes, to which the black lines sunk beneath gave a strange brilliancy ;



then suddenly her head fell forward upon his breast, and she lay limp and motionless in his arms.

He laid her down, looked long at the white face, fixed and ghastly in the moonlight. Then he felt himself seized once more with that sick horror which had taken possession of him once before that evening. As he turned his head away, the boatswain came up, and looked curiously down at the prostrate body.

"Why, sir, he's dead!" cried he.

Tregenna nodded.

"Leave—him lying there—till morning!" stammered he.

And as he spoke, he replaced his cloak, as he had promised Ann that he would do, upon her quiet limbs.

It was a moment of intense horror for him : although the passion the woman had felt, or professed to feel for him had left him almost cold, it was impossible not to be moved by the sight of that form, which he had seen so full of life and fire and energy, cold and still at his feet.

He could not shake off the chilly feeling of


having held converse with a creature of weird and supernatural attributes. Even when he retired to rest, leaving a sailor to watch by the corpse till morning, the thought of the woman and her strange end haunted him, would not let him rest.

It was long before he slept, and his slumber was disturbed by many an uneasy dream.

When he awoke, in the early morning light, there was a good deal of commotion on deck. On going to see what was the matter, he found that the body of Ann Price, alias "Jem Bax," had disappeared.

At first the man who had been left in the position of watcher professed to know nothing about the strange disappearance. But, upon being questioned with some shrewdness by Tregenna, he confessed that a small boat had come alongside about two hours before day-break, with a couple of men whom he did not know, who asked what had become of "Jem."

With a sailor's superstition, he had been only too glad to tell them of what had happened, and to let them carry away the



body in their boat, still covered with Tregenna's cloak.

The last he had seen of them was that, in the grey dawn, they had reached the shore, and landed their silent burden with difficulty on the beach, when the tide was out and the rocks lay bare and cold in the morning mist.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## A VERY WOMAN.

IT was with strangely mixed feelings that Tregenna heard this story of the carrying away of the body of "Jem Bax," the smuggler. Knowing, as he did, that it was a woman who had been thus borne across the water to her last resting-place, and with the memory of that farewell interview strong upon him, he was stirred, in spite of himself, by the thought of that swift and silent passage across the water to the shore ; and he seemed to be able to see, as he strained his eyes in the cold morning light, the smugglers' boat with its quiet burden, gliding over the grey sea to the dim line of rocks and foam which marked the edge of the shore.

The sloop had disappeared.

Later in the day the lieutenant went ashore,





and lost no time in making his way to the parsonage, as usual.

To his surprise and dismay, he was informed by old Nance, who opened the door to him, that Miss Joan had gone away that very morning.

"Gone away!" repeated Tregenna, in stupefaction. "But whither?"

"That's more'n I can tell you, sir," grumbled Nance, who seemed in an ill-humour, as if resenting her own position of ignorance. "But if you'll step in, maybe the master'll be able to tell you more."

So Tregenna went into the little dining-parlour, where he found the good vicar, looking rather gloomy.

"Hey-day!" cried Parson Langney, as soon as the young man entered, "what's this thou hast been about, Harry, to disturb thy sweetheart's peace as thou hast done?"

"I disturb her peace!" exclaimed Tregenna. "Nay, sir, I know not. I parted with her but last night the best of friends, as indeed you very well know, since it was here I passed the evening!"

"Well, she's taken herself away, this morning, to her aunt's at Hastings, and charged me not to tell you how to find the house."

"But, sir, how know you that I am the cause of this freak?"

"Ay, freak you may well call it, as indeed I told her myself. But she is as stubborn and as proud as can be on this matter, and all she would say was that no man was worth a thought, save her old father, and she begged me give her a few days away, to collect herself, ere she wrote to tell you you must see her no more!"

The lieutenant, whose limbs were shaking very much, sat down quietly, with his head spinning round. What cause of offence he could have given Joan, to induce her to treat him in this apparently heartless manner, he had not the remotest notion. The parson easily perceived how bewildered he was, and presently he said—

"'Twas after a visit from poor Gardener Tom, who came to the door after breakfast this morning, that she flew into so great a passion. She would not tell me what he said,

save that no man was to be trusted by any woman. Does that give you any clue to her behaviour?"

"Gardener Tom!" echoed Tregenna, at first without an idea as to any connection between the smuggler's visit and Joan's abrupt departure.

"Had it naught to do with your conduct towards another woman, think you?" suggested Parson Langney, watching him with keen eyes. "It was at the same time that Tom told us of the death of poor Ann Price."

At the mention of the name Tregenna started up.

"What did he tell her about that?" asked he, quickly.

"Ah!" said the vicar, with meaning. "Then it had something to do with that, eh?"

"Surely, surely, sir, Joan has too much sense, too much generosity, to be angry with me for showing kindness towards a dying woman!" cried the young man, with fire.


"Nay," said the parson, "I know not. A lass is a strange creature: how far did thy kindness go, Harry?"

Tregenna frowned. It flashed across his mind now that perhaps one of the smugglers' boats had been hovering about the cutter at the time of Ann's death, unnoticed in the excitement and commotion caused by the return of the boats' crews and the capture of a prisoner. If this were so, and if Gardener Tom had been one of the occupants, it was very possible that he had seen the kiss Tregenna had given the dying woman, and that he had recounted the incidents of that passionate farewell of hers to Joan.

Since Tom was jealous himself, it was not likely that he would let the story lose in the telling. This seemed the only possible explanation of Joan's strange flight, and it was a most disquieting one.

"'Tis true I did kiss her, sir, at her request," said Tregenna, after a short pause. "But there was never a kiss given in this world that was less cause for jealousy!"

"Well, I believe you, Harry, for I know you to be most truly attached to my daughter. But whether she will believe, is another question. A woman looks not at these things with



a man's eyes, nor does she listen to the recital of them with a man's ears."

"Sir," said Tregenna, proudly, "I hope she will come round to a sensible state within a few days, and send me some message to say so. For otherwise I will not humble myself to write and demand one. I could not trust the discretion of a woman who would show so little confidence in her lover!"

"Nay, let not your spirit carry you too far, or maybe you'll lose her altogether!" said the vicar. "And I would not have that; for though I would fain have kept my daughter with me a little longer, had it been possible, I should not hope to find for her an honester man than I believe you to be!"

"'Twill be the cruelest loss I have ever known, if I do lose her," answered Tregenna, with emotion. "But yet I shall have no choice, if she is so hard as to let me go without one word!"

"You will not take with you the name of the house where her aunt resides?" suggested Parson Langney, wistfully.

"No, sir. Let her send me a message, or I will not go to her!" retorted Tregenna.

"I intrude, sir. You are engaged upon your sermon, I see. Let me wish you a good day!"

And with a bow, and an air of great spirit, the young man left the house.

Hard though it was to be stern and constant to his determination, Tregenna kept his word. He did not call again at the Parsonage, nor did he attempt to find out the address of Joan's aunt. But he did certainly wander pretty frequently, in the course of the next few days, both in the direction of Hurst and of the town of Hastings, not without a secret hope that he would meet his offended sweetheart.

He felt that he had a right to consider himself aggrieved, since she was condemning him unheard. But at the same time, his glances towards the Parsonage grew more and more wistful as the days went by, and he still received no letter, no message. Had the vindictive and merciless Ann done him an injury in death greater than any she had tried to do him in life? It seemed so; and the lieutenant, though he assumed a more and more jaunty air as the time passed, hid a heart of lead underneath.

It was on the fourth day after the morning,



when Ann's body had been so mysteriously conveyed away, nobody knew whither, that Tregenna, on arriving at the village one morning, found the inhabitants all astir with some great excitement. They were congregating in groups about one particular cottage in the village ; and on inquiry as to the reason, he learnt that it was the day of Ann Price's funeral, and that they were waiting for the body to be brought out.

Tregenna lingered, on hearing this, and hoped that he might have an opportunity of meeting Tom, and of questioning him as to the mischief he had done.

When the coffin, covered with a deep black pall, was brought out of the house, however, the lieutenant found no one he recognized among the four bearers.

They were all rough-looking men, of the rather sinister type he had begun to know so well, but neither Bill Plunder, nor Robin Curse-mother, Ben the Blast, Jack Price, nor Gardener Tom, was among them.

"How comes it her brother is not one of the bearers?" asked he of a bystander.


"Sure, sir, 'tis you should know the reason of that better than anybody," returned the woman, saucily.

For the person of the lieutenant was now well known in the neighbourhood, and there was a sort of lively warfare carried on between him on the one side, and the women of the place, with their free-trading sympathies, on the other.

By this time the little procession had started towards the churchyard, and Tregenna, bare-headed, joined it on its way.

Slowly they went, past the few remaining houses of the village, and up the hill where the Parsonage stood. The church, a weather-beaten little structure, innocent of any sort of restoration except whitewash, stood beyond, on a somewhat lower level, and nearer to the marsh.

Under the building, at the east end of the church, there was a vault, which had belonged to the family at Rede Hall for nearly a century. The way to it was by a flight of worn steps, damp, uneven and overgrown with weeds, behind the east window.





Here the vicar stood, with the great key of the vault in his hand, waiting for the arrival of the solemn little procession.

Very weird, very awe-inspiring it seemed to Tregenna—the brief service held in the keen frosty air, under the lee of the old church, whose stones had been grey and old before the ancient Faith gave place to the new. There was a dead calm that day over land and sea, and the sea-birds flew inland, screaming, over the brown fields.

A strange contrast all the calm, the peace seemed to make, to the image of fire and passion, restless energy and feverish struggle which was called up by the name of Ann.

When the service was over, and the coffin had been locked away in the great bare vault, Tregenna left the rest of the company, and took a straight cut across the cliffs towards the Hastings road.

It was with no definite object of going in the direction of Joan's present residence, yet there was doubtless some thought of her hovering in his mind ; so that when, at a distance of some mile and a half from Hurst, he came suddenly


face to face with her at a turning in the road, he flushed indeed, but without much surprise, as if the person who had been in his thoughts had become on the instant present to him in the flesh.

She was in the company of a stout country lass, who was carrying a parcel under her cloak.

Tregenna bowed, but, except for the space of half a second, did not stop. And in return for the slightly resentful, cold and distant curtsey she gave him, he held his head very high in the air, and looked her full in the face with a defiant expression.

Perceiving this, Joan went suddenly white ; and as he went on, she presently halted, and turned to look after him. Now, it happened that Tregenna, although he had made up his mind that he would not be guilty of such a weakness, did in his turn stop and give a hasty glance back at her.

Joan, seeing that he instantly went on again, could bear it no longer ; he should not go like that, without knowing how little she cared. So she hastily bade her companion walk on, saying that she would overtake her shortly ;



and then she called, in a haughty and distant tone—

“Mr. Tregenna!”

And of course he had not gone far enough not to hear her.

He turned, however, in the most leisurely way possible, and walked back with a very lofty air of doing something he was much disinclined to do.

“Madam,” said he, when he had come quite near, “you called to me, I believe.”

“I did, sir,” said Joan, in a tone as lofty as his own. “I did but wish to ask you—whether the stage-waggon has passed this way.”

“I have not seen it, madam,” replied he, more superbly than ever.

“I thank you, sir.”

She dropped him a stately, dignified curtsey, to which he responded with a profound bow. Then he turned again and resumed his walk. This was more than Joan could bear.

“How can you, Harry?” burst from her lips.

“Nay, ’tis I should ask that!” retorted Tregenna, who was back again by her side in a moment. “’Tis I should want to know how

a woman can treat her lover as you have treated me this last five days!"

"They told me—they told me——" stammered Joan, who was now in tears.


He interrupted her quickly.

"Nay, then, if you are content to quarrel with me on account of what others tell you, without a word to me, 'tis time we should bid each other farewell, madam!"

"Oh, Harry, you are too hard, too cruel! And when 'tis your fault, all your fault! For Tom saw you with—with—her in your arms! You kissed her, once, twice, thri-i-i-ce! And—and when you told me you cared not for her! Nay, sir!" She drew herself erect, and looked at him with a challenge in her eyes. "Deny it if you can. You know you dare not, you cannot!"

"Most certainly I do not deny that I held Ann Price in my arms, nor that I did kiss her, as you say. And if you hold that I did wrongly in suffering the caprice of a dying woman, why, madam, I must tell you that 'tis you that err, not I."

"But—but—but she had sworn you should



kiss her!" whimpered Joan, falteringly.  
"Gardener Tom told me so."

"Madam, could I help that? She was sick to death, as you know. Whether 'twas for affection, which I doubt, or for spite, or for some other motive, I could do naught but that which I did. I will neither deny the action, nor excuse myself for it: since there was naught to be done but to humour her."

Joan looked at him through her tears; but although she still endeavoured to maintain her cold and haughty demeanour, it was plain both that she was longing to find some way of getting out of the position she had taken up, and that she was rejoiced at seeing her lover again. Tregenna, on his side, was just as feverishly happy in this meeting as she, and just as eager to go on with the quarrel, if that were the only way of holding converse with her.

She uttered another sob.

"I thought you cared for me!" sighed she.

"Madam, I thought I did also."

"But I see plainly you do not!"

"Nay, madam, then your eyes are keen to see the thing which is not!"

"If—if you cared for me, you would have been to visit me—while I was at my aunt's!"

"If you had cared for me, you would not have gone away!"

"Then this is to be farewell indeed, sir?"

"If such is your pleasure, madam!"

"Oh, Harry, you are too, too cruel!"

"And you," whispered Tregenna, his tone suddenly melting to tenderness, as he seized her in his arms, "are too foolish, my dear! Come, dry your eyes and confess that never had a maiden so little cause to doubt her lover as you! Oh, Joan, Joan, and I thought you were so wise, so sober-minded a person! I never guessed you were subject to caprices, like other women! I'm disappointed in you, Joan."

"Will you swear," said Joan, in a tremulous voice, "you had never any thoughts of love for her, but only for me?"

"I will swear it again, 'as I have sworn before. But you should not doubt me, Joan!"

She was looking rather ashamed of herself,



and it was easy to see that it would be no difficult matter to convince her of his truth.

"'Twas only," said she meekly, "that all men say she was so resistless a creature—that no man could stand against her wiles. But I'll be content, so you assure me with your own lips you loved her not, but were kind to her out of pity!"

Tregenna did give her assurance with his lips, in very impressive fashion. And they walked back together to Hurst, where Parson Langney, espying them from his gate while they were yet at some distance, greeted them with derisive roars of laughter.

"Nay, nay," said he. "What a flighty, wayward creature is a lover, male or female! If sober married folk did fly off at a tangent like to sweethearts in their courting, there would be never a household on the earth with both master and mistress within its doors at the same time!"

"Wherefore are you not busy with your sermon, father?" asked Joan, saucily, to turn the conversation and draw attention from her guilty blushes.

"'Tis too early in the week," retorted the vicar, with a twinkle of his merry eyes. "I was going to the churchyard to look for the key of the vault I opened this morning. I know not how I can have mislaid it."

They accompanied him on his search, but their efforts were in vain; and at last Tregenna suggested that the key might have been stolen.

"Nay, but who should steal the key of a burial vault?" objected the vicar, incredulously. "'Tis the last thing a man would covet, I imagine."

But though Tregenna did not press the point, the notion he had suggested did not leave his mind. And even after he had had tea with Joan and her father, and had started on his way back to his vessel, it recurred to him again and again.

So that at last he stopped short, turned back, and made his way once more to the churchyard.





## CHAPTER XX.

### THE FREE-TRADERS' FAREWELL.

WHAT if one of Ann's friends, her poor lover Tom for instance, had stolen the key of the vault, in order to be able to pass an hour by the coffin which held the remains of one who had been so dear to him?

This seemed so likely, that Tregenna was resolved to put his notion to the test. But he found the door of the vault safely locked, and no signs about of any recent visitor.

As, however, on the following day, the vicar confessed that the key had not yet been discovered, Tregenna made up his mind to keep an eye on the church; and he regularly, for the next ten days, paid a visit to the spot before returning to the cutter after his call at the Parsonage.


And on the tenth evening, just as he was

entering the churchyard by the little wooden gate on the north side, he caught sight of a human head disappearing rapidly, apparently into the bowels of the earth, behind the east end of the church.

Going rapidly and noiselessly in that direction, Tregenna reached the steps which led down to the vault, and saw that the door was open some inches. Descending cautiously, he could distinguish certain sounds within the vault, which betrayed the presence of live human beings; the mutterings and shufflings of feet grew louder, until he was able to distinguish the voice of Jack Price the smuggler, and another which he did not recognize.

After the lapse of a few seconds they began to make such a noise, as they pushed certain heavy loads about, to the accompaniment of much scraping of the stone floor, that Tregenna ventured to open the door a little farther, and to peep in.

A weird sight met his eyes. By the light of a torch, which smoked and flared, throwing a red light on the faces and figures of the men, and making a great patch of sooty black-



ness upon the green slime on the roof, Jack Price, long, lean, and woebegone of face, and Bill Plunder, short, crooked, and evil-looking, were busily engaged in piling up against the walls of the vault a huge quantity of kegs and bales of goods, in order to make them occupy the least possible space, and so make room for more.

Tregenna, hardened as he was to the smugglers and their villainies, could scarcely believe his eyes. Not a sign of a coffin was to be seen. Apparently the dead had been turned out of their resting-place, to make way for the merchandise of the "free-traders."

As he thought of the callousness which could thus make an opportunity out of the death of an old comrade like Ann, to find a new nest for their contraband wares, the lieutenant felt that he could restrain himself no longer. Casting all prudence to the winds, and unmindful of the fact that these two might have comrades within call, he dashed open the door of the vault, and seizing the tall Jack Price, by a clever movement flung him sprawling on the stone floor.

Bill Plunder, though taken aback for the moment, recovered himself, and planting himself behind a breastwork of contraband merchandise, levelled his pistol at Tregenna.

The lieutenant whipped out his own weapon at the same moment, received a bullet in his right shoulder, and answered by firing with his left a shot which made Bill leap up in the air with a loud cry. The next moment Tregenna found himself grappling with Jack, who had risen from the ground and seized a broken piece of metal which was lying on the stone floor.

Jack fought like a madman, slashing and plunging at his opponent with a vigour and ferocity which seemed to render the combat a hopeless one for the lieutenant, whose wound was bleeding freely, when, just as Tregenna felt his head growing dizzy and his eyes becoming dim, the smuggler, in making a desperate lunge at him, tripped in some ropes which were lying on the floor, and stumbled headlong over a couple of the smuggled kegs of spirit.

Quick as thought Tregenna seized one of

the kegs, sprang to the door, got outside, and wedged the door tightly with the barrel, which he had rolled out in front of him.

The space at the bottom of the steps was just wide enough to allow of this being done ; and then, without waiting to see whether the men would make any attempt to escape from their imprisonment, he started for the Parsonage.

Before he got there, however, he found himself staggering, and knew that he would not have strength left to reach the house. As he stood swaying to and fro for a few seconds on the footpath, he caught the sound of a waggon going along slowly at the foot of the hill. There was a man walking beside the horses, cracking his whip and urging them on. It was too dark for Tregenna to see either waggon or man ; but the frosty air carried the sounds to him clearly, and carried back his fainting cry—

“ Help, help ! ”

Then he fell down on the grass beside the footpath.

When he came to himself, after a curious

experience of being in the sea, swimming for life, with a dozen faces he knew around him, he found that he was still lying on the grass, but that there was at least one face he knew bending over him, looking very weird and strange by the light of a heavy lantern, which had been placed on the ground beside him.

And the face was that of Gardener Tom!

"Tom?" cried he faintly.

The great boorish fellow watching over him burst into a great blubbering and sobbing, like an overgrown child.

"Ay, 'tis me, sir, and glad am I to see you look at me again. For oons, sir, I thought you'd shut your eyes for ever! You're hurt, sir—badly hurt. And for sure 'tis one of them rascally smugglers that's done it!"

Ill as he was, Tregenna smiled and raised his eyebrows.

"Smugglers, Tom! Nay, sure you mean 'free-traders.'"

"I means *smugglers*, domn 'em!" roared Tom, energetically. "And if ever I carry a keg again, or help 'em in their wicked ways,



may I be riddled through and through, loike as if I was a target !”

“ Since—when have you—become so virtuous ? ” panted out Tregenna, feebly.

“ Since one of 'em, nay, two of 'em served me a dirty trick, sir,” answered Tom, fiercely. “ Ask me no more, sir ; for sure I don't want for to let out what I've in my moind ! ”

“ How long—have I lain here ? ”

“ Not more'n the space of half a minute, sir. And no more you mustn't. I be going for to call them at the Parsonage.”

“ Nay, nay, Tom, I should alarm them, in this plight.”

“ Never fear for that, sir. It would alarm 'em more for you to die ! ”

And Tom hobbled away in the direction of the vicar's house at a great rate.

As he lay there in the cold air, Tregenna was vaguely conscious of a feeling of satisfaction that Gardener Tom had turned to honest ways. And then his mind began to wander again. He was recalled to full consciousness by a delicious sense of ease and peace, and by feeling the touch of the hand


he loved the best in the world on his forehead.

A few minutes afterwards he was lying on a hastily made bed in the vicarage parlour.

Tregenna lay ill for some weeks ; for the wound inflicted by Bill's bullet was a serious one, and he had lost so much blood before he was discovered by Tom, that there was a fear lest he might not be able to stand the drain.

Thanks to the tender nursing he received, however, at Joan's loving hands, he presently began to mend. And it was when all danger was past that he learnt the fate of the two smugglers whom he had imprisoned in the vault beneath the church.

Jack Price had managed to escape, but had had the misfortune to run straight into the arms of the brigadier and his soldiers, who now patrolled the country round Hurst with more assiduity than before. Being recognized as one of the most prominent of the smugglers, he was seized, carried to Rye, and hanged within a fortnight ; for such offenders as he had scant shrift in those times.





Bill Plunder was found dead in the vault, having been killed by the shot Tregenna had fired at him in exchange for his own.

An enormous quantity of smuggled goods, which had been secreted in the vault, were confiscated by the authorities; for even Squire Waldron had begun to see that his reign of laxity was over.

Not a sign of the coffins was to be found, however; and a thrill of horror ran through every one at the thought that the smugglers had even got rid of these in order to make way for more plunder.

A deep peace seemed to fall over the whole neighbourhood after the death of Jack Price and Bill Plunder. The brigadier flattered himself that he should get promotion for his energy, and Tregenna felt that his task was done, and that the time was convenient for the retirement he had promised the vicar.

So fully satisfied were the authorities in London that the mission of soldiers and revenue men had been thoroughly and effectively accomplished, that the brigade was


shortly withdrawn from the neighbourhood, and the cutter was sent to another part of the coast.

It was not until after his withdrawal from the service, when the snowdrops were peeping above the ground, that Tregenna came down to Hurst, and put up at the best inn, ready for his marriage with Joan on the morrow. It was to have been a very quiet wedding; but Joan had made herself so much beloved in the countryside that, long before the time for the ceremony had arrived, the whole churchyard and the grass around were thick with a dense throng of people.

Gardener Tom was there with a huge nose-gay of hothouse flowers, speaking loudly his hatred and detestation of the whole sex, with the exception of Miss Joan.

Squire Waldron and Bertram were there, in smart hunt colours, waiting to welcome the bride.

The ladies from Hurst Court were there, simpering and wondering how the vicar's daughter could be so selfish as to leave her father! They wouldn't have done it, not they!



Men, women, and children from Hurst and the villages round were there with their snow-drops, to strew on the path before sweet Mistress Joan.

All was peace, and brightness, and happiness ; and the winter sun came out in her honour as blushing Joan, tall and handsome, in her plain white dress and veil, came from the Parsonage, leaning on her father's arm.

The service was over ; the blessing had been spoken on the young people, and Tregenna was leading his bride down the little aisle, when a sound reached the ears of all present which froze the blood of some of them.

It was a peal of loud, mocking laughter, in a well-known voice.

It came into the church from the wide porch, and echoed through the building.

"Ann!" cried Tregenna, under his breath.

"No, no, not Ann ; but Jem Bax!" cried the well-known voice, in clear and ringing tones.

And into the bright light of the doorway strode Ann, in her lad's dress, with a keg slung in front and one behind, in approved smuggler fashion.

"Heaven bless you both, for a pair of innocent lambs," she cried, raising one hand as if in benediction. "See, Ben, do not they make a monstrous pretty pair? Prettier than you and me, when they made us one!"

And the burly form of Ben the Blast, with his kegs slung over his shoulder, came into view behind her.

Everybody was too much taken aback, too much amazed at the deception Ann had practised, and at her unflagging audacity, to attempt to touch either her or the smuggler at her side. With another laugh and a wave of the hand, they both left the church porch, sprang on the back of a stout horse which was waiting at the gate, and were away over the marsh to the new haunt they had made, before Tregenna had had time to recover his wits.

He had done with her, for ever; but there was still trouble in store for the representatives of law and order, while the daring, wicked spirit walked the earth in the flesh.

"Are you jealous still, Joan?" whispered Tregenna, in his bride's ear.

## FREE-TRADERS' FAREWELL. 315

"No. But—I'm thankful she's married, Harry," was the fervent answer.

"And I," returned Tregenna with equal fervour, "am thankful 'tis no longer my duty to cope with her and her tricks. For, faith, I believe she's in league with the very powers of darkness!"

THE END.



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